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Is the use of social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa morally justified?

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Is the use of social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa morally justified?

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Submitted to the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Science in Medicine (Bioethics and Health Law).

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Qualifications: PhD

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Date: Aug 2025

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I Nhlalonhle Mkhonza

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am a student registered for MSc (Med) Bioethics and Health Law in the year 2025.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my grandfather whose memory continues to inspire me every day.

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I want to extend my gratitude to my Supervisor, Dr Cornelius Ewuoso, for his insightful and continuous guidance from the beginning of this project in 2023. He helped shape what was an idea into a project, and for that, I am incredibly grateful. I also want to acknowledge the University of Witwatersrand – Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics for broadening my perceptions and knowledge on Bioethics. Throughout this journey, I have moved from being an ordinary healthcare worker to one who is ethically conscious, purely because of their teachings.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUD	- Australian Dollar
Afro-communitarianism	- African Communitarianism
SARS-CoV-2	- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2
SAPS	- South African Police Service

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic goes down in history as one of the pandemics that moved the entire world. It moved governments and leaders worldwide to adopt various public health measures to mitigate its spread, mainly using social sanctions. This thesis critically examines the ethical justification of social sanctions as a means of public health risk communication in South Africa, drawing from Afro-communitarian perspectives grounded on the notion of solidarity and rights. Social sanctions have been used even before the pandemic to enforce compliance with public health measures, but their moral legitimacy within an African communitarian context remains contested. Afro-communitarianism, which emphasizes relational rights, positive reciprocity, and communal solidarity, provides a unique moral lens through which to evaluate these measures. This study argues that the use of social sanctions during the pandemic in South Africa was morally unjustified. By imposing unjust restrictions, these sanctions disrupted vital communal bonds, violated contextual and relational rights, and undermined core Afro-communitarian values of an African. Furthermore, the restrictions prevented communities from exercising their moral obligations toward one another, ultimately compromising human dignity. Using a normative ethical approach, this research also engages with relevant philosophical frameworks. The study concludes that Afro-communitarianism offers a more culturally sensitive ethical framework for states of emergency public health responses aimed at preserving lives and advocates for policies that balance disease prevention with preserving communal identity and moral obligations. The findings contribute to bioethical discourse by highlighting the need for culturally informed public health strategies that align with African societies' values and lived realities.

CHARPTER ONE

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The term social sanctions, as well as their relationship with social control and public health risk communication, deserve to be unpacked. Notably, social sanctions are tipped as an effective means of realizing social control. Social control refers to the agencies and measures put in place by society – for example, through health departments – to regulate behavior, promote the adoption of acceptable norms and preserve social cohesion. The success of any public health risk communication depends on social controls. Public health risk communication is the *process* of communicating (actionable) health information that will aid the public in making informed decisions about their health and behaviour. It (public health risk communication) includes communicating information about public health and safety, disease outbreaks, natural disasters, and food safety(1). An example will be a Billboard with the message, "Please don't kill us". The message speaks to the need for drivers to refrain from drinking before driving. Within the coronavirus pandemic context, messages concerning the washing of hands, wearing facemasks, social distancing are other examples of public health risk communication to limit the impact that coronavirus could have had. The ultimate goal of public health risk communication is to foster the adoption of healthy lifestyles/habits or limit disease impact.

Social controls have a vital role to play in public health risk communication. These controls can take many forms, such as laws, regulations, social rules, and cultural practices. An example of social control policy during the last Coronavirus pandemic is

the ban on the sale of alcohol and cigarettes in South Africa. The overarching importance of social control is to ensure that all people behave in a manner that will not harm society and individuals.

Although social controls play a vital role in public health risk communication, nonetheless, social controls are themselves realized through different approaches. One relevant approach is through social sanctions (2, 3). Social sanctions are defined as the "reaction of approval or disapproval in response to someone's action."(4) Social sanctions are intrusive and are implemented by constraining an individual's choices to a higher or lesser degree. Particularly, social sanctions are forms of intervention. As detailed in the higher steps in the Nuffield Council on Bioethics' Intervention ladder, they can be implemented by eliminating choice, restricting choice, guiding choice by disincentives or incentives and changing the default policy (5, 6).

As intervention mechanisms instruments, social sanctions are used to undermine behaviour that negatively affects public good/health. For example, during the hard lockdown in South Africa, one intervention that was imposed was the limitation of free movement or inter-provincial travels to undermine the spread of the corona virus (7). At this stage, choices were guided through the implementation of fines to discourage individuals.

Two main types of social sanctions are worth describing at some length. They include formal or informal sanctions (8). Formal sanctions are official rules of laws or regulations that are enforced by a governing authority. These are officiated by legal documentation either endorsing or prohibiting the behaviour. Formal sanctions are implemented to enforce social norms, which are said to be good behaviour, or undermine behaviour that threatens the public good. Sanctions may be formalized by

punishing undesired behaviour. The punishment can be a monetary fine, imprisonment, or other forms of dis/incentives to guide choice or promote acceptable behaviour. For example, a study (9) conducted in Australia to evaluate the reasons why people were willing to comply with the coronavirus restrictions during the pandemic within the country fingered the use of on-the-spot fines imposed by Police as one reason many Australians complied with coronavirus pandemic restrictive measures. Depending on the severity of the violation, fines could exceed AUD$ 10,000.

On the other hand, an informal sanction is a type of punishment or reward that is not officially enforced by a governing authority but rather by community members or society. It is based on the community's collective judgment and can be more immediate and personal than formal sanctions. Often, these are an extension of the members' collective norms, values, and cultural or religious beliefs. These types of sanctions are developed to endorse conventionality while discouraging behavior that is considered inappropriate or deviant (8, 10).

Evidently, different social sanctions raise different ethical challenges. Many sanctions were used as forms of interventions that aim to undermine coronavirus spread, particularly, in South Africa. This project will focus on the permissibility of the use of lockdown measures and the corresponding *fines and punishments* for violating these restrictions (to undermine the impact the virus could have had) during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa. To undertake this task, this project will draw on two key concepts, solidarity and rights grounded in Afro-communitarianism, to interrogate the permissibility of implementing these social sanctions to limit disease impact. Although I unpack the Afro-communitarian thinking about solidarity and rights in the body of the project, nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that a philosophy is said to be Afro-

communitarian if it is informed by values that are dominant on the African continent and has not come to the continent from elsewhere. Afro-communitarianism is a dominant philosophy in Africa and is informed by values like communal relationships and modes of experiencing the world salient on the African continent. In light of the importance that is often placed on communal relationships in this philosophy, an action is right or moral to the extent that it connects, rather than divides, individuals.

Given the thinking about morality in Afro-communitarianism, one potential intuition that this may give rise to is that the use of social sanctions to undermine the impact that coronavirus could have had was justified since it appeared to limit or stop disease spread. This project defends a contrary position.

1.2. Literature review

Following a wide search for credible and grey literature on implementing fines for violating travel restrictions and confinement during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa on multiple academic search engines such as PubMed, Google Scholar and ResearchGate, *no publications of normative ethical papers were found that explored the permissibility of social sanctions to undermine coronavirus impact in South Africa, by drawing on the thinking about rights and solidarity in Afro communitarianism.*

However, academic publications explore other ethical issues that arise from the different domains of the coronavirus pandemic using the Afro-communitarian approach. One example is a study titled *'Afro-Communitarianism and the Role of Traditional African Healers in the COVID-19 Pandemic' (11).* The article argues that Indigenous traditional healers have a significant role to play within their very own communities in order to mitigate the issues faced by a vast majority of the healthcare systems within African countries. A major challenge is the failure of the healthcare

systems to be more responsive to patient needs due to the unavailability of resources. The authors argue that no one is in a greater position to help inform the communities about preventing and limiting the spread of the virus than the traditional healers.

Another article titled *'Ubuntu Philosophy as a Humanistic–Existential Framework for the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic' (12),* leverages key elements of the Ubuntu philosophy to outline concrete measures for undermining coronavirus impact broadly. The authors first explore the concept of holism and what it symbolizes in the Ubuntu philosophy and then demonstrate its implications for the fight to end the pandemic in more ways than just the medical approach, exploring environmental and spiritual elements, amongst others.

Another article titled" *A Relational Approach to Rationing in a Time of Pandemic' (13),* outlines specific ways the thinking about moral status and harmony grounded in Afro-communitarian philosophy can increase our thinking about rationing scarce resources like ventilators and medical personnel.

Finally, an article has explored and justified self-isolation to undermine disease impact from the Afro-communitarian perspective (14).

Public health ethicists have also weighed in on the use of social sanctions to undermine health outbreaks. They argue that there is more that needs to be taken into consideration – over and above favoring the “public good” when deciding to action out social sanctions in the control and management of infectious diseases(15, 16). In their view, the permissibility of social sanctions must be assessed based on whether these sanctions incorporate the core principles of Public health ethics, namely: need for evidence, least restrictive alternative, least harmful alternative, proportionality, equity, reciprocity, due legal process and transparency (16).

This project is different from these existing studies since it – for the first time – draws on the thinking about right and solidarity grounded in a moral approach in the Global South to interrogate ethical questions regarding the use of social sanctions (for example, the lockdown measures and the imposed fines and punishment for violating these restrictions) in an African context. In this regard, the project *does not merely* explore the permissibility of confinements and travel restrictions, but the sanctions implemented for violating them. This will contribute towards filling the existing gap in this literature.

2. Research Question

Is the use of social sanctions during the coronavirus Pandemic in South Africa morally justified? To answer this question, I draw on the thinking about rights and solidarity grounded in Afro-communitarianism.

3. Rationale for the study

Whilst social sanctions are made use of recurrently in public health and public health emergencies to foster behavioural change, promote forms of public health interventions or limit disease impact, the ethical dilemmas that arise from deploying these mechanisms remain uncharted, particularly in African moral philosophy literature. This is a critical gap. This study affords an opportunity to contribute towards filling this gap by drawing on African standards and ethical principles to normatively interrogate the use of social sanctions during public health emergencies for an African country (South Africa). The academic value here is that this will fill the existing knowledge gap. This study is also of public health importance since it increases our understanding of morally acceptable measures of promoting public health, at least in an African context.

4. Thesis

Drawing on the thinking about rights and solidarity grounded in Afro-communitarianism, I contend that the use of social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa was morally unjustified.

5. Research aim

This project aims to defend the thesis.

6. Research objectives

- To describe the thinking – as well as the moral norms that can arise from the thinking – about rights and solidarity that can be grounded in the Afro-communitarian philosophy.
- To draw on the moral norms arising from the thinking about rights that can be grounded in Afro-communitarianism to interrogate the permissibility of using social sanctions during the coronavirus in South Africa.
- To defend the claim that social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa undermine human dignity and is, therefore, immoral.
- To defend my thesis against possible objections

7. Research Design

This project will be a Type 1 normative bioethical project. Normative ethics is a branch of philosophy that is aimed at defining what is permissible or impermissible, what ought to be done or avoided, and why (17).

8. Research methods

The project is desktop and library-based research. No new data has been collected, nor will this study recruit human participants or animals. The usual research methods applicable to academic philosophical research will be used in this project. It encompasses the interpretation and critique of relevant ethical texts and publications needed to answer the research question. The analysis of these texts will include, but not limited to, the classification of key concepts and the elements which give identification to these concepts. These will be used to generate logical arguments and objections. The sources of relevant literature are not limited to research articles, books, and computer-accessible databases (like PubMed and Phil papers). I will use keywords like “social sanctions,” “coronavirus and South Africa” and “socials during public health emergencies,” to retrieve these relevant materials.

9. Argumentative strategy

Strategy 1

To realize objective one or defend the same:

- I will provide a comprehensive account of Afro-communitarianism, highlighting this philosophy's salient features that cut across many formulations.
- Following this, I will provide an account of solidarity that can be grounded in salient features of Afro-communitarianism. For example, one thinking is that solidarity in Afro-communitarianism entails collective responsibility to act in ways that improve the well-being of others or ease their burdens.
- Furthermore, I will show how the thinking about solidarity entails the norm that we ought to be accountable for each other's interests.

- Lastly, drawing on examples from different contexts of the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa, I demonstrate how the use of social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa placed an undue burden on individuals and is a failure to be solidary.

Strategies 2 and 3

To realize objectives two and three, or defend the same:

- First, I describe an account of rights grounded in the salient features of Afro-communitarianism and subsequently demonstrate the link between this account of rights and the conception of human dignity. Central to this link is the gradient conception of moral status, which entails claiming that individuals have moral status to the extent that they can commune and be communed with.
- Secondly, I also demonstrate that an essential way of promoting human rights in Afro-communitarianism is by promoting individuals' (full) moral status, which entitles them to human dignity, at least from the perspective of the modal relational account of Afro-communitarianism.
- Finally, I will demonstrate how instances of the use of social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa failed to honour individuals who have dignity by virtue of their (full) moral status.

Strategy 4

To realize objective three or defend the same:

- I will address a potential objection that supports the imposition of social sanctions to safeguard public health. To address this objection, I demonstrate how a deontological interpretation of the Afro-communitarianism I draw on would emphasize that the means to an end and the end itself ought to be moral. Some

ways of relating are inherently immoral. Against this background, *some* social sanctions are intrinsically immoral.

- I will also address a potential objection that I have mischaracterized Afro-communitarianism or the conception of right or solidarity that can arise from it. This is to say that Afro-communitarianism, in actual fact, supports the use of social sanctions. To address this objection, I will demonstrate how my interpretation aligns with widely published opinions on the same.

10. Research outcomes and Impacts.

The project aims for the following outcomes:

- Aid in developing an effective National African Disaster Strategy – for future pandemics.
- Contribute to the current pool of knowledge being generated to understand the impact of public health risk communication.
- Influence policy and enforcement of government "rules" for promoting public health or disease outbreak preparedness.
- Publish and present at scientific meetings.
- Contributes towards fulfilling the requirements for the award of a master's degree in bioethics and health law at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

11. Limitations

The best way to discover if social sanctions are permissible to a group of people is to ask them directly. For this purpose, empirical studies would be required. However, this study is a philosophical and conceptual project that employs logical reasoning. Nonetheless, I do not think this is necessarily problematic. Notably, whilst this study

design could reasonably be interpreted as a limitation, the approach to draw on dominant values in Africa makes up for this limitation since it provides insights into how Africans would likely respond to this question. Evidently, I do not claim that this study should replace empirical studies. In fact, empirical studies would be required to complement this project.

12. Ethics Approval

This project does not require research with human participants or animals. No new data will be collected. For this reason, I will not be applying to the Ethics Committee of the University of Witwatersrand for ethical approval.

CHAPTER TWO

2. AFROCOMMUNITARIANISM, SOLIDARITY AND RIGHTS: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

This chapter provides an account of the ethical theory – African communitarianism that grounds the values – rights and solidarity – that I draw on. Additionally, the section demonstrates how African communitarianism differs in its approach from other theories that an audience in the West may be familiar with. Equally, the section outlines the key features of these values and the moral norms that the combination of these values gives rise to. The chapter is not merely concerned with outlining the common beliefs about these values; it will also explore the contestations and debates behind them and the implications that the contestations may have for the research question that it interrogates.

2.1. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: AFRICAN COMMUNITARIANISM

The description of African communitarianism that I provide in this section is not meant to be exhaustive. Notably, my aim in this section is to highlight common beliefs about this philosophy, as well as how the philosophy differs from those dominant in the West. Formally, Afro-communitarianism is defined by the African ethicist Kwame Gyekye as "the moral beliefs and presuppositions of the sub-Saharan African people and the philosophical clarification and interpretation of those beliefs and presuppositions." (18) These beliefs influence life and daily practices in many African cultures. It is the compass many cultures draw on to make decisions about what is in the best interest

of self and societal conduct i.e. how one should behave in different settings such as school and community meetings.

Traces of the Afro-communitarian approach to ethics date back to the primitive years in Africa. Indigenous Africans have conducted themselves and maintained their relations with each other in ways that are communitarian and are the basis of Afro-communitarianism (19). Ideas about the exact ways Afro-communitarian philosophy is communitarian are not straightforward. Three tendencies are noticeable in this philosophy: radical communitarianism, moderate communitarianism, and modal communitarianism. One of the key proponents of the radical communitarian school of thought is The Reverend Placide Tempels, who published his work Bantu Philosophy in 1959. The 'Disciple' of Tempels, Professor John Samuel Mbiti later followed on the ideas of Tempel in his publication of *African religion and philosophy,* where he lays out the notion of kinship and the role it plays in African communities (20). In the present-day, radical afro communitarians reflect mainly on Ifeanyi Menkiti's work that is influenced by Samuel Mbiti to construct a philosophy that is purely African. Radical Afro-communitarianism firmly holds that an individual can only be considered a person if they belong to a community (this notion of persons and personhood is discussed later in this report). The main focus and priority is the community before the individual within radical communitarianism (20).

Kwame Gyekye has defended moderate Afro-communitarianism. Kwame Gyekye contends that we must begin by first looking into the capacity of the individual, as a community is made up of individuals (21). He advocates for the integration of the individual with the community. Kwasi Wiredu, a moderate Afro-communitarian, describes this integration in another way as" individual thought and communal thought' (20). Lastly, the term modal communitarianism is sometimes used interchangeably

with the term moderate afro communitarianism. However, they are distinct. Notably, while moderate Afro-communitarianism often emphasizes actual participation in communal living as a condition for moral status, modal afro communitarianism says it is the capacity for communal relationships that is essential. The latter is the view of Thaddeus Metz.

In all accounts of Afro-communitarianism, communal relationships are the core of morality. Afro-communitarians like Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye sometimes defend the idea that communal relationships are the basis for developing personhood. For example, In Kwame Gyeke's view, one is not a person by merely being human; rather, personhood is directly dependent on moral worth and attained through one's active moral responsibility within the community (22). In this way, the relations and engagements one has in the community and with other persons determine if they are worthy of personhood (23).

African communitarianism and other theories

It is also essential to differentiate Afro-communitarianism from other moral approaches that a Western audience may be familiar with, even if briefly. One may view Afro-communitarianism in the same light as Ethics of Care. This is because both moral approaches emphasize the importance of relationships and use similar phrases. Afro-communitarianism holds that a person does not exist in isolation but instead makes part of a larger community. It further holds the idea that morality is concerned with realizing one's true self. which can be achieved only through communal engagement—by conducting relations with others, sharing values with them, and promoting the common good (24, 25). Ethics of care views caring relationships as an

absolute imperative for one. It further holds that once one enters a caring relationship; they are responsible for sustaining and enriching it. The caring relationship is maintained through constant self-respect, trust, and other elements which represent the notion of ethics of care (26).

Nonetheless, although these approaches share important similarities, they differ in emphasis. The African ethicist Thaddeus Metz, in *'The Western ethic of care or an Afro-communitarian ethic' Specifying the Relational morality*' contrasts Ethics of Care with Afro-communitarianism in other ways. These two differ in the level of importance they place on solidarity and *identifying* (26). Although I describe solidarity in a subsequent section, notice that it tends to entail acting to enhance others' life qualities. Contrarily, identifying entails the thinking of oneself as a part of a "we." Identifying plays a key role in shaping Afro-communitarianism, unlike in the Ethics of Care. In African communities, both solidarity and identity are equally emphasized. All must act and behave as a collective, and to an extent, the collective can feel a sense of accountability for an action that is carried out by one of their own. For example, a family apologizes for their son who has offended a new pupil in school by making a prejudiced remark (26). On the contrary, ethics of care tend to emphasize solidarity more than identity. A care ethicist will support and sustain a caring relationship by being empathetic and attentive to Others' needs, for example, the rich giving donations to the less fortunate (26). However, a care ethicist does not always think that it is necessary to identify with such persons. However, it is important not to view this distinction as an either/or framework. Afro-communitarianism does not preclude care ethics. Instead, these approaches may overlap in keyways. Both emphasize moral responsiveness, empathy, and the value of relationships—though Afro-communitarianism places greater weight on communal identity and mutual

accountability. In many contexts, Afro-communitarianism can be understood as a culturally grounded expression of care ethics (26).

Afro-communitarianism also differs from Kantian ethics. In the 18th century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated a form of deontological ethics that is famously known as Kantian ethics. There are other deontologists like *John Rawls* (27) and *Thomas Nagel* (28). However, I focus on the Kantian ethics. Notably, Kant emphasized the moral importance of duties and the use of universal principles when deciding on the right action (29). Kant calls these principles the Categorical Imperative (CI). It (Categorical Imperative) is said to be a universal moral law – it is an absolute and exceptionless rule that must be followed in all circumstances and should be consistently applied to everyone (30). Three of these imperatives are common. They include: “Act so that the maxim of your action should become a universal law”; “act only so that you always treat humanity as ends in themselves, never as a means”; and lastly, “So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends” (31). The basis for treating oneself or others either as a member of the kingdom or ends or never as a mere means is the rational capacity individuals possess. To clarify, an individual does not possess this capacity at birth. Instead, as individuals age, they become more rational and thus can be considered persons and objects of moral duty. Individuals derive their intrinsic worth from their rational capacity (30, 32). Contrarily, Afro-communitarianism grounds the intrinsic worthiness of an individual in the *capacity to conduct and maintain positive communal relationships* (33).

Finally, it is also worth distinguishing the Afro-communitarian philosophy from Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, often termed as a consequentialist ethical theory, holds that right actions maximize overall happiness and pleasure while minimizing suffering

for the greatest number of people (34). The ethical theory of utilitarianism is often associated with thinkers like Jeremy Bentham, who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries. An English philosopher and legal theorist, Jeremy Bentham developed the principle of utility by means of which he contended that actions should be judged based on their capacity to maximize happiness and minimize suffering for the greatest number of individual (35). Other key utilitarians include John Stuart Mill (who emphasized the importance of outcomes when making moral decisions (36), Peter Singer, who is famously known for his defence of preference utilitarianism.

One key distinction between utilitarianism and Afro-communitarianism lies in the focus on communal values and relations in Afro-communitarianism. Utilitarianism prioritizes the majority even if it is at the expense of the minority and their interest, leaving marginalized groups vulnerable and neglected (37). Afro-communitarianism places importance on communal harmony, with a commitment to addressing the needs of individuals in the community. From the Afro-communitarian perspective, exploitation of the minority would be wrong even if it produces benefits for the majority. This would be an unethical way to relate with those with whom one has a communal relationship (38).

Rights in Afro-communitarianism

This project is mostly evaluative. Hence the conception of rights that I describe here is not exhaustive of the numerous ways different Afro communitarians have articulated rights. This section simply describes the relevant conceptions of rights that can and have been grounded in Afro-communitarianism and are useful for my mostly evaluative goal.

The African ethicist Thaddeus Metz defines rights as *"a natural duty owed to other individuals, a duty that may not be overridden for the sake of marginal gains in ostensibly good consequences and that is grounded on some features shared with (nearly all) human beings."*(39)

The various beliefs about the relationship between the community and individuals (radical, moderate or modal Afro-communitarianism) also influence how scholars think about rights (19, 40)(12). In other words, views about rights are shaped by the contestations around the relationship between the individual and the community, that is, whether they are radical or moderate in their thinking. Radical Afro communitarians like Ifeayni Menkiti contend that rights come secondary to duties as they are encompassed within the phenomena of keeping communal harmony. In this framework of radical Afro-communitarianism, individual rights are not viewed as independent or absolute. Rather they are understood and are defined circumstantially in the context of community relations and shared responsibilities (41).

The priority is communal values, social justice, and collective well-being while recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals within the community. This view directly challenges the traditional Western notions of individual rights (40). Meanwhile, moderate Afro-communitarians like Kwame Gyekye passionately believe that there ought to be a balance between social forces and rights, where rights are understood as both individual and collective. However, in moderate Afro-communitarianism, emphasis is still placed on community cohesion and solidarity while balancing these with individual rights(42).

Lastly, modal African ethicists such as Thaddeus Metz will reflect on the concept of rights based on the dynamic and context-dependent nature of communal life in what is referred to as relational rights (43). Rather than relying on universal or abstract

principles, rights are defined based on the capacities individuals have for communal relationships (43). Whilst still all African but different communities may prioritize different rights based on their unique experiences and needs. Moreover, in order to promote rights within these diverse African communities,' dialogues are essential for resolving conflict and determining what the prioritised rights are for that particular African community. Modal Afro communitarianism holds that rights are evolving as so do times therefore they are subject to reinterpretations (43, 44). Summarily, rights have a place in Afro-communitarianism. However, its significance varies from different schools of thoughts, radial, modal or moderate.

Another key feature of rights is that it entails reciprocity, implying that rights support the idea of something one is entitled to as a result of participating in specific forms of relationships. The act of returning generosity and kindness is an expectation in communal African relationships. It is deeply grounded in the ethos of *Ubuntu* (45, 46). In Afro-communitarianism, the reciprocal relations that are promoted are typically positive as opposed to negative. In Julius K Nyerere's view, negative reciprocity involves interactions that are based on exploitation, manipulation, and conflict. It may entail giving with the expectation of receiving something in return, often with little regard for the well-being of others or the long-term consequences of one's actions. It is important to note that negative reciprocity does not necessarily imply a complete absence of returning an act of generosity but to an unbalanced form of interaction where one party benefits at the expense of other community members, resulting in tension and conflict, for example, land grabbing (47). Contrarily, positive reciprocity, as Ifeanyi Menkiti argues, involves giving and receiving in a manner that fosters social cohesion, trust, and collective well-being (48). Notably, positive reciprocity entails returning an act with a positive effect with an act that also produces a positive effect.

To this end, positive reciprocity prohibits acts that take advantage of others or exploit them (48).

It is worth noting here that reciprocal acts need not be of the same quality. For example, gift-giving plays a significant role in showing appreciation or commemorating special occasions. When one receives a gift, this necessitates that when an occasion comes for a gift to be given back, it should be the exact same gift. However, the African view of positive reciprocity does not require that gifts should produce equal positive effects. Equally, reciprocal acts can be short- and long-term. For example, harvesting of farm produce is a community activity that entails active participation of every member, even when a particular member does not expect to harvest their own produce any time soon. Relatedly, reciprocity also entails doing unto others what you wish to be done to you. This is the golden principle (49). We can already begin to see the implication brought forth by this element of right, which is that, as communal persons, individuals have a right to be positively aided or benefitted, especially when they have contributed towards positively benefiting others.

One other feature of rights in the discussion about the same among Afro-communitarians is that rights entail respect, and they (rights) can be had to a higher degree. Suppose individuals are entitled to certain goods. In that case, we ought to respect, that is, honour their rights, as well as facilitate the achievement of this entitlement. This is what is entailed by respect in this tradition. Notably, respect has always been one of the cornerstones of African societies. Respect is manifold. It comprises respect for individuals, community, elders, and the environment (46). Respect may be hierarchical within these societies. As people grow in age, they are to be respected by those younger than them (50). The elderly are respected for their

wisdom, knowledge, and traditions, which they, in turn, pass on to the younger ones through moral education. Importantly, elders are in possession of communal knowledge and ethics, and respecting them is paramount as it allows them to impart knowledge of cultural values and historical consciousness (50). In his work *"African Ethic of Respect for Persons"* Metz argues that within many African societies, elders are often accorded a higher status [and rights] due to their wisdom, experience, and contributions to the community. On this basis, they deserve a higher respect. Additionally, Menkiti, in "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," emphasizes the role of elders in African communities in decision-making. In fact, it tends to be the case that the death of elderly persons is more painful to the community than the death of a younger person.

Respect is expressed and observed in greetings and salutations. For example, this may be by using both hands during a handshake and not using the left hand to hand over something to an elder (51). This element of respect and affording a higher degree to elders is non-negotiable and is an obligation since it directs the behaviour of all members to ensure that they live in social harmony (45). Although elders are indeed afforded a ranking that is higher within African communities and could potentially be entitled to enjoy more luxuries such as being the leader, respect is also accorded to the young. Concerning this, the young are mainly accorded respect for their potential and completion of the cycle of interconnectedness and interdependence of the community members across generations (41). What this section wishes to point out is that supposed rights entail respect, and certain individuals are accorded more respect than others. In that case, some individuals are afforded more rights than others in African communitarianism.

A final feature of rights worth mentioning is restraint. Generally, restraint can be seen as a form of self-control, moderation, or deliberate limitation in behaviour, actions, or expressions. Restraint helps us understand how rights are to be exercised within the community. The importance of restraints in the discourse of rights in Afro-communitarianism implies that there is an expectation and norm of sacrifice of self when considering the needs of the collective as opposed to individual rights. Rights are to be exercised by weighing and balancing the needs of the collective against one's rights (45). The point here is that rights are not absolute entitlements. Persons are urged to exercise their own rights in a manner that will reflect the morals, values, and dignity of those around them. One's right is justly exercised when it fosters communal harmony and unjustly exercised when it causes division.

Solidarity in the scholarship of Afro-communitarians

This section describes the key relevant features of solidarity dominant in the Afro communitarian philosophy. Barbara Prainsack and Alena Buyx define the term solidarity as an *"enacted commitment to carry the costs (financial, social, emotional, and other contributions) of assisting others with whom a person or persons recognize the similarity in a relevant aspect"* (52). It (solidarity) is an essential value within African societies that aim for the flourishing of her members (53).

Notably, in African communities, it is not only important to stand in solidarity with your community during crisis and emergencies such as pandemics, but also a constant ethos that African communities live by every day. People ought to come together or unite to support those in distress and celebrate as a collective over an achievement. In this way, solidarity follows through on the maxim*: "*I am because we are" where

one's achievement is considered as a victory for the whole community and a downfall is also seen in the same light (53).

African ethicist Thaddeus Metz has made significant contributions to the African discourse on solidarity. He links this concept to moral altruism to that of solidarity in Afro-communitarianism. This linkage is not only culturally ingrained but also defensible from a philosophical standpoint that is rooted in the significance of communal values and interconnectedness. To understand how they are linked, he points out how moral altruism is seen and said to be a natural expression of solidarity (54). Although positive reciprocity is not out of place in Afro-communitarianism, equally emphasized is the idea that one ought to benefit others for their sake because this is who we are. Notably, other-regarding behaviours like acting in ways that enhance the life quality of others are expressions of solidarity that are intrinsically valuable even when one will not benefit from such actions. Such acts of kindness are not uncommon. They are frequently observed in various practices, such as contributions towards the funeral ceremony of a late member of the community with no immediate family (37) (54, 55).

Furthermore, solidarity is also a moral obligation. Kwame Gyekye defines a moral obligation as the natural duties and responsibilities that individuals have towards others who make part of their community. He holds that moral obligations are not deduced from rules but from the communal values and norms of that particular community. In this way, individuals fulfil these moral obligations not because of the negative reinforcement but rather out of genuine commitment to the common good and well-being of their community (21).

Kwasi Wiredu agrees with this view. He justifies this by referring to the decision-making processes in African societies, which require mutual consent by the collective, as being the seed that gives rise to solidarity as a moral obligation amongst Afro-

communitarians (56). Collectivism within African societies is far-reaching. The interdependency of all persons within communities in making a single decision promotes a sense of belonging and identity for all (57). When the well-being and identity of an individual are linked to the well-being of the community, it requires for there to be unified actions for all community members. For example, community farming projects provide food for families (58).

Rights and Solidarity in African communitarianism: A new moral imperative

This section will provide an account of the moral norms that arise from the above discussions of rights and solidarity in the Afro-communitarian context. More particularly, it will explore these norms in relation to the discussed features. Moral norms are understood as standards of behaviour that are based on shared principles or values within a community or society, guiding what is considered right or wrong (18). Notably, a moral norm seeks to guide how we ought to act and conduct ourselves in everyday living. They can, therefore, also be seen as the consequences that result from features of both rights and solidarity (59).

The first moral norm that can be traced from the element of rights in Afro-communitarianism is that of community before the individual, unlike Westernized deontology, which often prioritizes the self-rule of individual autonomy (60). Afro-communitarianism emphasizes the moral obligation one has towards the community since the community plays a significant role in shaping one's identity. This norm asserts that communal relationships are intrinsically valuable in themselves. To this end, the right action brings individuals together rather than divide them (61).

Personhood as a moral concept is another important norm in Afro-communitarianism. In some published works, personhood is not an inherent quality of individuals, that is,

it is not something one has from birth but rather a status to be achieved through one's actions and contributions to the community (62). The development of personhood is a moral journey that emphasizes relational virtues, such as respect, responsibility, and communal involvement. One earns one’s status as a person through demonstrating moral maturity and contributing positively to the community's welfare (61). The moral implication of this way of thinking about personhood is that one ought to contribute positively to other’s well-being since this is the means by which one has personhood.

The norm of respect for elders highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the wisdom and experience of the older generation (58). Elders are seen as the custodians of tradition and moral knowledge, and their guidance is considered crucial for maintaining social harmony and moral order. This norm highlights the belief that moral knowledge and authority are not equally distributed across all members of the community but are particularly embodied in those who have lived longer and experienced more. To this end, we ought to revere them.

A right in Afro-communitarianism is often context-dependent and relational. Rights are not viewed as absolute entitlements that individuals can have and enjoy unrestrainedly. Instead, they are understood within the context of one's relationships and responsibilities within the community (63). This norm suggests that the exercise of rights is contingent upon fulfilling corresponding duties to others and that rights are best understood in the context of promoting collective well-being. Notably, individuals should be willing to limit their own desires and aspirations for the benefit of the community. This norm encourages the cultivation of virtues such as self-control, humility, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices when necessary to promote the collective welfare (61). It reflects the understanding that true moral maturity involves

recognizing the interconnectedness of all community members and acting in ways that prioritize the common good over individual gain.

Conclusion

In this section, I provided an account of the ethical theory – Afro-communitarianism – those grounds the values of rights and solidarity. Additionally, in this section, I demonstrated how Afro communitarianism differs in its approach from other theories that an audience in the West may be familiar with, namely Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and Ethics of Care. Furthermore, I elaborated on several key points that characterize and differentiate Afro-communitarianism from other approaches to ethics. In summary, Afro-communitarianism emphasizes communal relationships and interconnectedness to a degree that is not normally found in other moral approaches In the next section, I will demonstrate how this moral approach does not justify social sanctions during the coronavirus in South Africa.

2.2 PERMISSIBILITY OF USING SOCIAL SANCTIONS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS IN SOUTH AFRICA.

In this section I aim to draw on the moral norms explored above that arise from the thinking about rights and solidarity as grounded in Afro-communitarianism to interrogate the permissibility of using social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa. This will ultimately lead to my defence of the claim that social sanctions, particularly the use of the lockdown measures, fines, and punishments, used during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa, undermined human dignity and is, therefore, immoral. However, I will first provide a brief account of what the coronavirus pandemic entailed by outlining the different alert level restrictions made use of in South Africa during this period. Before turning to my critique, it is worth noting that some may argue that social sanctions, though coercive, were implemented with the goal of preserving rather than destroying communal harmony. From this perspective, limiting mobility and gatherings was a collective sacrifice intended to protect elders and vulnerable community members. This objection suggests that even within Afro-communitarianism, short-term disruption could be morally permissible if the long-term goal was community protection. I will later argue, the way in which these sanctions were executed—without sufficient cultural consultation or community ownership—ultimately fractured rather than fortified communal bonds.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus causes the coronavirus disease. This disease is infectious and can spread through the mouth or nose. This virus is present in the small liquid particles that are produced and projected into the air when coughing, sneezing, speaking, singing and breathing (64). In December 2019, the global health custodian, the World Health Organization (WHO), reported that they had recorded a cluster of pneumonia

cases in Wuhan, China. It was then confirmed that the infecting agent for all those reporting with this respiratory infection is the SARS-CoV-2 agent referred to as the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (65).

As this outbreak grew with more cases being recorded and reported worldwide, South Africa reported its first Coronavirus case on the 5th of March 2020. Soon after, the World Health Organization announced the coronavirus disease outbreak in 2019 as a public health emergency on the 11th of March 2020 (66) (67). The rapid spread of coronavirus disease within South Africa resulted in a large number of reported infections. People infected displayed either mild or severe symptoms. In total, during the pandemic period of the coronavirus, South Africa recorded 4,076,463 coronavirus-reported cases: 102,595 recorded Deaths and 3,912,506 recoveries (68).

In response to the growing pandemic, the South African government declared it a national state of disaster, signed by the National minster of corporate governance and traditional affairs on the 15th of March 2020 and announced to the country by the president of the Republic of South Africa on the 16th of March 2020 (69). There was a total shutdown of all economic, leisure, and corporate activities apart from the limited movement for essential service providers, i.e., Health Care. The shutdown began at midnight on the 26th of March 2020.

A level system within the country guided the lockdown. This was referred to as the alert system. The Alert system had five distinct levels, i.e. level 1, level 2, level 3, level 4, and level 5. The lockdown was implemented with varying restrictions based on an alert system with five levels, each determining the severity of restrictions. These included limitations on travel, gatherings, and workplaces.

The alert levels were adjusted over time. The timeline for each restriction was enforced as follows:

- Alert level 5: full lockdown from March 26 to April 30, 2020
- Alert level 4: from May 1 to May 31, 2020
- Alert level 3: from June 1 to August 17, 2020
- Alert level 2: from August 18, 2020
- Alert level 1: from September 21 to December 28, 2020
- Adjusted alert level 3: from December 29, 2020, to February 28, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 1: from March 1 to May 30, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 2: from May 31 to June 15, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 4: from June 16, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 3: from June 16 to June 27, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 4: from June 28 to July 25, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 3: from July 26 to September 12, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 2: from September 13, 2021
- Adjusted alert level 1: from October 1, 2021(70) (71).

The primary aim for the development and implementation of these regulations was to curb and control the rapid spread of this infection whilst giving the government time to prepare and capacitate their response mechanisms for the outbreak, like building multiple temporary field hospitals to act as isolation areas for those who test positive

and are in need of admission, mobile testing units and procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) and digging (about 1.2 million) graves in preparations for all the projected deaths (72).

During the coronavirus pandemic, the South African government implemented a strict lockdown and introduced fines as a key enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance with public health regulations. These fines were imposed for various violations, including failure to wear masks, breaching curfews, travelling without permits, and hosting or attending gatherings beyond the allowed capacity (73, 74). The fines varied based on the severity of the offence, with penalties starting from R500 for minor infractions and escalating to R50,000 for businesses that operated in violation of lockdown rules. The government justified these fines as necessary deterrents to reduce the spread of the virus and protect public health, ensuring that individuals and businesses adhered to the lockdown measures(75).

The fines were enforced through the South African Police Service (SAPS) and local law enforcement agencies, which were given the authority to issue fines on the spot or arrest individuals who failed to comply. Law enforcement officers carried out routine patrols in public areas, checking for compliance with mask mandates, curfew restrictions, and social distancing guidelines. Those caught violating the regulations were either fined immediately or given court dates to address their violations. Additionally, police roadblocks were set up to enforce travel restrictions, where individuals found traveling without the necessary permits faced fines ranging from R1,000 to R5,000, depending on the circumstances of the violation (75). One of the most common fines was for failing to wear a mask in public spaces, which carried a penalty of R1,000. Curfew violations, particularly during the stricter lockdown levels, resulted in fines between R1,500 and R3,000, depending on the location and time of

the offence. Businesses that continued operating despite restrictions faced significant penalties, with fines ranging from R5,000 to R50,000, particularly for liquor stores, nightclubs, and restaurants that violated closure orders. Additionally, individuals who attended illegal gatherings or hosted events exceeding the permitted number of attendees were fined R3,000 or more, with repeat offenders facing higher fines or potential arrest. Between March 2020 and mid-2021, authorities issued over 400,000 fines and arrests related to lockdown violations. These penalties were part of a broader strategy to enforce compliance and prevent further outbreaks. In some instances, those unable to pay the fines faced additional legal consequences, including court appearances and possible criminal records (76). The enforcement of fines was particularly visible in urban areas where strict patrols were conducted, while rural enforcement varied due to logistical challenges. To support compliance and inform the public, the government launched public awareness campaigns detailing the fines and consequences of non-compliance. These campaigns were communicated through radio, television, social media, and community outreach programs to ensure widespread understanding of the regulations. Additionally, essential workers and those with valid travel permits were exempt from certain fines, provided they could present the necessary documentation during inspections. The use of fines as a tool for enforcing lockdown restrictions remained a central aspect of the South African government's pandemic response, aiming to reinforce the seriousness of the measures and prevent behaviours that could contribute to the spread of the virus (75).

While in this chapter I have explored the ethical concerns around social sanctions during the Coronavirus pandemic, it is important to explicitly demonstrate why social cohesion, as promoted within Afro-communitarianism, offers a morally superior and culturally appropriate alternative in times of crisis. "For instance, an HSRC (2020)

survey found that in rural KwaZulu-Natal districts where local chiefs led public health messaging, self-reported mask adherence reached 87%, compared to 62% in neighbouring districts relying solely on police enforcement. Similarly, the Community Action Networks in Cape Town reported a 40% increase in voluntary quarantine uptake when community leaders mediated guidelines, illustrating the operational viability Afro-communitarianism views social cohesion not merely as a descriptive feature of African societies, but as a normative standard—an obligation to maintain harmony, mutual support, and communal accountability (78). During the Coronavirus pandemic, community members in various rural and peri-urban South African settings spontaneously engaged in collective action, such as organizing informal health education, sharing personal protective equipment, and helping with food distribution. These are documented by the HSRC (2020) and show elevated levels of voluntary compliance in contexts where punitive enforcement was minimal (77, 79). This reinforces the idea that policies grounded in communal trust and culturally informed leadership (e.g., involving Izinduna, traditional healers, or local faith leaders) would have aligned more closely with the values of interconnectedness and mutual care that Afro-communitarianism prioritizes. Such approaches would reduce resistance, build public trust, and maintain moral legitimacy—outcomes not typically associated with coercive sanctions (11).

Over 60% of South Africans viewed lockdown enforcement as unfair, and trust in law enforcement during the pandemic dropped below 45%. This empirical evidence supports the argument that coercive social sanctions undermined both compliance and legitimacy, weakening the very social fabric that Afro-communitarianism seeks to protect. Social cohesion is not simply a cultural tradition in African ethics but a workable, morally rich, and practically effective alternative to top-down coercion. It

strengthens compliance through care, not fear—through community, not command of cohesion-based strategies(77)

The Violation of Contextual and Relational Rights

Though aimed at safeguarding the element of physical health within health, the multiple coronavirus lockdowns and the restrictions imposed within South Africa during the pandemic present significant ethical issues, particularly within the Afro-communitarian approach to Ethics. Afro-communitarianism conceptualizes rights as relational and context-dependent and are (rights) deeply tied to individuals' communal responsibilities and interconnectedness, as defined by Thadeous Metz (39). Unlike Western approaches to ethics, such as deontology, which is closely associated with individual autonomy (78), Afro-communitarianism holds that a person's rights arise from one's responsibilities and relationships within a community. In this view, a person's well-being cannot be entirely separated from communal well-being; instead, these two must reflect on each other. Daily community participation of each person is fundamental to one's dignity and plays a crucial role in ensuring all members of society achieve the desired level of personhood and reflect on the core values of their community (14).

The lockdowns and associated fines (hereafter: I will simply say lockdowns) imposed restrictive isolation measures, which included being confined to a single household and requiring permission to travel within the towns and districts. In contrast, interprovincial travel was banned for most of the hard lockdown period (79). All these disrupted the essential communal bonds, infringing on relational rights by preventing meaningful social participation, such as rituals done for young girls and men when they are coming of age, in a way that celebrates their formation of personhood.

Funerals were held in a procedural manner lasting no longer than one hour and a limit of 50 attendees, undermining an opportunity to come together (80). Afro-communitarian values favour holistic well-being, encompassing physical health, emotional, social, and spiritual elements of health— all these additional elements were undermined by strict isolation. Therefore, the failure of coronavirus lockdown restrictions to accommodate the communal centre and nature of Afro-communitarian rights within an African country – South Africa, shows injustice.

Moreover, from an Afro-communitarian perspective, violating contextual and relational rights and failing to respect elders within the communal hierarchies proves unethical as these two ethical foundations of Afro-communitarianism reinforce each other. Rights are not isolated entitlements but deeply integrated within the community's social structure, particularly that of elders and adherence to communal hierarchies. In African communities, elders are seen and held high status. they are viewed as the hub of wisdom and historical and cultural knowledge, guiding community members' behaviours and actions, relational responsibilities, and fostering personhood through shared experiences, rituals, and traditions. The South African government not only restricted movement through isolation mandates but also imposed fines and punishments for those who violated these restrictions. Individuals caught violating curfews faced fines ranging from R1,500 to R3,000, depending on the severity of the breach. Travelling without a permit between provinces resulted in penalties as high as R5,000, and for those unable to pay, alternative punishments such as detainment or court-mandated community service were imposed. These penalties disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, particularly those in informal settlements where daily economic survival required movement. For many, the choice was between violating restrictions and facing fines or being unable to provide for their families. Additionally,

businesses that operated against regulations, such as small street vendors and informal traders, faced steep fines of up to R50,000. While larger corporations could absorb such penalties, small business owners, who relied on daily earnings, were left in financial ruin. Furthermore, law enforcement officers had broad discretion in enforcing these fines, leading to inconsistent application and, in some cases, allegations of corruption and abuse. Reports emerged of officers accepting bribes to waive fines, further exacerbating social inequality. In addition to the economic strain, punitive enforcement generated significant psychological distress. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (2021), calls to mental health helplines spiked by 34% during the first three months of lockdown, with a notable proportion linked to anxiety over fines or police enforcement. Studies in comparable African contexts report heightened levels of stress and post-traumatic symptoms when sanctions are enforced without community consultation, particularly among low-income groups.

The Coronavirus lockdown restrictions and lockdown, by enforcing physical isolation, not only severed essential communal ties but also stripped elders of their roles and responsibilities within the community and further stigmatized them as they were given the status of being a "high-risk group'. This hindered their ability to fully execute their moral duty of passing on cultural values, providing mentorship, and participating in rituals, such as funerals and rites of passage, which marked significant milestones within Afro-communitarian life. Undermining these practices disrupted the critical component of relational rights: the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, identity, and support foundational to Afro-communitarian, particularly personhood. Thus, the enforcement of isolation measures and the lockdown restrictions during the pandemic infringed on individual and communal rights, negatively affecting the fabric

of community solidarity and structure, relying on intact hierarchies and active elder participation for ethical coherence and communal resilience.

In addition to fines, other punitive measures were enacted. Thousands of South Africans were arrested for violating lockdown regulations, further burdening the legal system. In some cases, individuals were detained for minor infractions, such as walking outside during curfew hours or failing to wear a mask in a public space. This criminalization of lockdown violations disproportionately affected marginalized communities, reinforcing existing structural inequalities. The long-term consequences of these punishments included criminal records for minor offenses, which impacted future employment opportunities. In Afro-communitarianism, a more ethically appropriate response would have balanced public health goals with cultural practices essential for relational rights through localized gathering policies, measures to make outdoor activities safer without a complete ban, community-led decision-making and community-driven compliance measures, could have ensured that public health guidelines were upheld without disproportionately punishing the poor. Putting measures into place to balance the public health interests and ethical appropriateness within Afro-communitarianism during the pandemic would ensure that communal bonds seen as foundational in Afro-communitarianism are respected and preserved throughout.

Decline in Positive Reciprocity giving rise to an inhuman African Society

A second concern arising from the Afro-communitarianism perspective towards the coronavirus lockdown restrictions is that it resulted in a decline in positive reciprocity and discouraged acts that displayed nobility and fostered an environment for negative

reciprocity, encouraging persons within their communities to be inhumane towards others.

Positive reciprocity is a core belief of Afro-communitarianism. Positive reciprocity is the mutual exchange of *beneficial* goods and acts amongst community members to ensure trust, social cohesion, and collective well-being are preserved (45). These mutually beneficial exchanges take place through daily social interactions and community-support practices. The enforcement of isolation and separation through the lockdown restrictions stopped these communal support systems. Indirectly, the norm and standard of an Afro-communitarian society- positive reciprocity and commitments made by persons towards reciprocity were undermined. The disruption compromised the foundations of an Afro-communitarian society, as it imposed restrictions that cut relational bonds essential for both material support and social identity within these communities.

Positive reciprocity is foundational in many African societies and within the developing country of South Africa, which operates through informal economies and collective labour. The lockdowns limited social and economic activities, restricting access to marketplaces, group gatherings, and collective labour practices like communal farming. Between the first day of the lockdown to mid-June 2020, there had already been a reported shrinkage of the economy by 8,8% (81). Such communities as those in South Africa - a developing African country- depend highly on communal income generation through shared activities, in order to fulfil their basic human needs for survival and thriving. Each person plays a role in the well-being as they willingly engage to contribute to the welfare of the whole community, build trust, and reinforce social bonds. When such interactions are restricted, essential communal relationships are split, preventing persons from engaging in mutual caregiving practices—

particularly for elders and vulnerable members, i.e., people with disabilities who rely on the collective for their well-being. In addition to the restrictions on movement and communal interactions, the imposition of fines for violating lockdown regulations further eroded positive reciprocity. Fines, which ranged from R1,000 for failing to wear a mask to R5,000 for unauthorized travel, introduced an element of financial punishment that disproportionately affected low-income communities. Instead of fostering a sense of shared responsibility in addressing the public health crisis, these fines discouraged community members from assisting one another out of fear of incurring penalties. In some cases, individuals hesitated to provide food or support to neighbours in need, knowing that any perceived violation of lockdown measures—such as stepping outside during curfew hours—could result in hefty fines or even arrest.

Due to positive reciprocity being non-existent during the lockdown period, the government involuntarily fostered conditions resembling negative reciprocity, which involves interactions marked by an imbalance where community support is unfulfilled and an increase in unmet needs. Although the intent was to protect physical health and minimize the number of severe infections and deaths of South African persons, the measures failed to preserve and ensure the continuous provision of holistic needs of the Afro-communitarian communities. Fines reinforced negative reciprocity by punishing individuals for actions that, under normal circumstances, would have been acts of communal support. The fear of financial penalties caused community members to disengage from their traditional obligations of care, weakening the social fabric that Afro-communitarianism seeks to uphold. Due to the inability to sustain reciprocal exchanges and an environment that punished any attempt to restore such communities, they faced a decline in social cohesion and mutual trust. More severely,

the lockdown restrictions introduced a new unethical and non-African behaviour of negative reciprocity. Persons and even family members were now taught to prioritize individual health. They were leaving communities isolated and unable to support their members, even those within who might not be equipped or in a position to prioritize and preserve their well-being without the help of their community members. The addition of financial sanctions further deepened this divide, teaching persons and even family members to prioritize individual survival over communal welfare. The fear of fines and legal repercussions led to a shift in behaviour where individuals became reluctant to aid those in need, leaving communities isolated and unable to support their members, even those who were most vulnerable and in urgent need of assistance.

Disregard for Communal Solidarity

Solidarity within an African society is not only valued as a response in times of crisis but as an everyday ethos and moral duty that helps to sustain the entire community's well-being. An Afro-communitarian community deeply values solidarity because it is embedded in the daily life of all members and reflects each one's collective responsibilities to one another. Afro-communitarian ethicist Kwame Gyekye states that as a moral obligation - solidarity stems from shared values and norms unique to each community, not external or imposed rules (18). Similarly, solidarity is expressed through collective acts that foster interconnectedness, such as supporting the elderly, caring for the sick, and gathering for funerals. These standard practices show the pledge of the community's moral voice and the mutual and consensual commitment to keep one another's welfare, particularly those experiencing a threat to their welfare.

However, during the coronavirus pandemic, the introduction of fines for violating lockdown regulations marked a significant violation of the core principles of solidarity

within Afro-communitarian societies. The imposition of fines as a punishment for failing to adhere to lockdown rules directly undermined the communal bonds that define Afro communitarianism. Rather than fostering mutual support, the enforcement of financial penalties for minor infractions, such as violating curfew or gathering in groups, turned community members into targets of state-sanctioned punishment. This approach disregarded the communal values of collective responsibility and care, as it isolated individuals from their families and networks during a time of crisis, when solidarity was most needed. The dictated restrictions through fines from the government did not reinforce solidarity; instead, it forged a disconnection between individuals and their support systems. Importantly, it stripped the community of its capacity to express the values of mutual aid and the spirit of togetherness essential to Afro-communitarian life.

For an Afro-communitarian community, the lockdown restrictions went against the ethical principle of solidarity by preventing the fulfilment of their collective duties to one another (18). Their traditional expressions of solidarity include community members and families gathering to mourn a deceased person from the time of death to their burial and providing care of various kinds for the ill, whether chronic and long-term or acute, such as the coronavirus. These limitations prevented persons from fully actualizing their shared moral obligations because they could not identify and perform the most basic acts of support and connection for those in need, integral to the communal identity and interdependence that define Afro-communitarian ethics.

Altruism is deeply intertwined with solidarity within Afro-communitarianism, where it represents more than simple acts of kindness or support—it is a core moral duty and an embodiment of the community's commitment to collective welfare. In this ethical framework, altruism is not primarily directed at achieving personal gain; instead, it is a way of recognizing and expressing an individual's intrinsic role within a network of

reciprocal care and mutual responsibility, as explained by Afro-communitarian ethicist Thaddeus Metz on how the notion of altruism aims at enhancing the lives of others as an end in itself. Therefore, altruism is visible through daily interactions to demonstrate a shared moral allegiance to one another. During the coronavirus lockdown, however, these altruistic acts were abruptly stopped. The imposed isolation and limitations on gatherings interrupted the usual ways in which altruism is expressed, leaving community members unable to fulfil their inherent responsibilities toward the vulnerable, the elderly, and those in crisis; in turn, the enforcement of these restrictions suppressed the actions that sustain trust, solidarity, and interconnectedness within the community.

Perhaps the most significant violation relating to the norm of solidarity in a democratic country and one that is led by Afro-communitarian norms is enforcing these restrictions without community involvement. In Afro-communitarianism, the moral obligations towards one another stem from the entire community's internally-derived shared values as opposed to externally imposed directives (82). It is clear that the lockdown restrictions disregarded the Afro-communitarian approach of South Africans towards archiving the goal of collective well-being by enforcing isolation measures without consultation. In effect, the lockdown restrictions unjustly undermined the communitarian values of mutual dependence, collective resilience, and moral reciprocity; this destroyed the ancestral and long-term essential bonds that sustain Afro-communitarian life. The coronavirus lockdown restrictions undermined the ethical stance of a communitarian South Africa so heavily that it resulted in a fracture in the community's ability to remain interconnected, resilient, and mutually supportive.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed ethical examination and account of the use of social sanctions particularly that of fines and imprisonment during South Africa's coronavirus lockdown through the lens of Afro-communitarianism. I have argued that, while intended to control the spread of the virus and limit the number of deaths, they conflicted with Afro-communitarian values central to South African society. These values include human dignity, relational rights, and positive reciprocity, all forming the foundations of communal living within a communitarian society. In this discussion, I provided a detailed ethical examination and account for the use of social sanctions during South Africa's coronavirus lockdown through the lens of Afro-communitarianism. I argued that, while intended to control the spread of the virus and limit the number of deaths due to the virus, they conflicted with Afro-communitarian values central to South African society. The undermined values include human dignity, relational rights, and positive reciprocity, which all play a critical role in communal living and are fundamental within communitarian society.

Each of my arguments vividly highlights how the restrictive sanctions disrupted relational rights by severing essential communal bonds, eroded positive reciprocity via the enforcement of isolation and undermined solidarity by preventing collective duties central to Afro-communitarianism. My analysis proves that while the multiple lockdowns and sanctions aimed to reduce physical harm, the restrictions and sanctions used to enforce public compliance during the isolation period failed to accommodate Afro-communitarian values of interconnectedness and holistic well-being. Ultimately, what was achieved was the alienation of persons due to the fear of imprisonment and or financial constraint from their communities and the premature destruction of the communal structures crucial to their identity and support –

personhood and its role in cultivating an African society were never protected nor encouraged during the difficult times and the uncertainty that accompanied it.

However, academic and literature concerns remain about the long-term cultural and psychological impacts of pandemic restrictions or sanctions within Afro-communitarian societies. Bioethical research should further investigate this question. Lastly, the South African government and public health policymakers could benefit from adopting culturally sensitive policies by consulting communities. This would ensure that the government reacts to outbreaks by adopting measures that are community-informed and community-oriented.

CHAPTER THREE

3. RESPONDING TO VOICES OF OBJECTION

In this chapter, I respond to potential objections from care ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism that might challenge my critique of social sanctions during the pandemic. While I have previously outlined the justifications for rejecting such sanctions from an Afro-communitarian perspective, I engage with counterarguments that may defend their necessity or morality here. I demonstrate that care ethics' emphasis on relationships, deontology's focus on duty, and utilitarianism's concern for overall well-being do not ultimately override the Afro-communitarian critique. Instead, I show that the logic of Afro-communitarianism—prioritizing ethical means and communal harmony—offers a stronger moral foundation that refutes these objections. Additionally, I address concerns that my interpretation of Afro-communitarianism or its conception of solidarity may be mischaracterized, demonstrating its consistency with established scholarly perspectives.

Objections and Responses to Ethics of Care school of thought

The coronavirus pandemic presented unique challenges to all public health systems worldwide, especially in South Africa. South Africa is among the countries that enforced some of the strictest lockdown measures during the span of the coronavirus pandemic. While these measures were intended to safeguard public health, they raised complex ethical questions, particularly regarding the balance between protecting lives and maintaining cultural practices. Supporters of the lockdown and its restrictions, particularly from the standpoint of Care Ethics, justified the restrictions by highlighting their role in emphasizing relational well-being, solidarity, and preserving life. Care Ethics places significant importance on reducing harm and protecting

vulnerable individuals. In this context, the lockdown was seen as a moral duty that was aimed at safeguarding the most at-risk populations. However, while Care Ethics provides valid reasoning for such measures, it lacks the depth of cultural sensitivity that Afro-communitarianism offers. Afro-communitarianism, focusing on communal identity and collective responsibility, provides a more suitable framework for addressing the ethical challenges posed by the pandemic in a culturally rich society like South Africa. Both Afro-communitarianism and Care Ethics emphasize solidarity but differ in their approach. While Care Ethics prioritizes relational responsibility and empathy as an approach to ethics, Afro-communitarianism emphasizes collective identity and accountability, arguing that individuals are deeply embedded in their communities. This collectivist approach contrasts with Care Ethics, which often centres on the needs and well-being of individuals within the broader relational network. In the context of a pandemic, Care Ethics would support adherence to public health measures—such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and avoiding large gatherings—as a demonstration of solidarity, urging individuals to protect the collective good. However, Afro-communitarianism extends this notion further by also encompassing the preservation of communal life and cultural practices, which are seen as integral to maintaining and passing the shared values and communal identity down to younger generations. The South African coronavirus lockdown measures halted a number of sacred cultural traditions, especially concerning funerals and other community events. In many African communities, these ritual and cultural practices are vital expressions of collective grief and serve to strengthen community bonds. One might concede that whilst restriction was necessary to curb the spread of the virus, the approach could have been more culturally sensitive. Instead of imposing broad, uniform restrictions, the government could have worked closely with community

leaders—both traditional and political—to ensure that cultural values and social practices were considered. Adopting this type of communal participatory decision-making would have allowed South Africa's public health response to align with the Afro-communitarian values of their communities whilst still promoting the spirit of self-reliance and ownership of personal and communal well-being. Of ethical importance, it would ensure that communities' collective identity, dignity and cultural practices were respected while still addressing the health crisis.

The fundamental pillar of interconnectedness within Afro-communitarianism shows how we can fully understand who an individual is and the value of life apart from their communities. Though essential for preserving life and minimizing infirmity and death, public health measures must also be implemented in ways that do not erode society's social and cultural fabric, which accounts for the individual within a community. In this light, Afro-communitarianism responds to the Care Ethics objection of prioritizing the protection of the individual life by looking into how this perspective overlooks the significance of communal rituals that directly impact the very well-being of the individual life. Advocating for the Afro-communitarian balance between safeguarding life and honouring cultural practices provides a more holistic approach to managing public health crises. Incorporating Afro-communitarian principles into South Africa's response to the pandemic would have ensured that the ethical response did not only look to ensure that the number of deaths did not increase but also would have assured communities that the government was mindful of the cultural and social needs of the population.

In Afro-communitarianism, persons have a collective responsibility to care for the vulnerable members of their communities. This is similar to the tenets of Care Ethics, which also emphasizes the importance of protecting those most at risk. However, Afro-

communitarianism expands on this idea by recognizing that such protection must be embedded within a framework that respects and upholds cultural values. In this way, Afro-communitarianism advocates for a communal and collective approach to public health; however, communitarianism promotes care for individuals within their cultural and social settings. Another critical aspect of Afro-communitarianism is how it approaches leadership and governance. In many African societies, traditional leaders and elders play a critical role in guiding communities, and their involvement in decision-making could have made the pandemic response more effective, in turn making the community more receptive and compliant. Instead of relying only on state-composed and imposed measures, the government also had a critical role in empowering local leaders to mediate between public health guidelines and the cultural practices of their communities. Community leaders could have served as trusted voices, ensuring that public health directives were communicated effectively and providing solutions aligned with cultural traditions.

Afro-communitarianism also suggests that non-compliance with public health measures should be accounted for in community-driven ways instead of the fines and possible jail time accompanying the social sanctions. Instead of solely relying on punitive measures, community leaders could have worked alongside health authorities to find creative ways to enforce restrictions while respecting cultural norms that ensured that people remained connected even as they practised social distancing.

While Care Ethics provides a solid foundation for prioritizing life and minimizing harm, Afro-communitarianism focuses on community identity and solidarity. This adds a crucial layer of cultural respect and inclusion. The pandemic highlighted the importance of developing public health strategies that address the physical well-being of individuals and consider the cultural and social contexts in which people live.

Objections and Responses to the Deontology School of thought

The coronavirus pandemic forced governments of affected countries worldwide to confront complex ethical dilemmas, another being the balance between individual rights and collective well-being. In addition, in this section I will also expand into the critical scope by engaging more deeply with utilitarian and Kantian frameworks. These perspectives offer competing justifications for the use of social sanctions in emergencies and must be considered for a robust ethical evaluation. In South Africa, the government's decision to impose one of the strictest lockdowns in the world sparked intense ethical debate, especially regarding its necessity and proportionality. Kantian ethicists argue that the lockdown measures fulfilled the categorical moral duty. In this view, the duty to protect health and prevent harm was non-negotiable, in Kantian ethics, preserving human life is an absolute, universal obligation. Transcending concerns about individual liberties or economic impacts. Allowing the virus to spread unchecked would be viewed as a failure of honouring one’s moral duty, as it would mean sacrificing lives for the sake of less important concerns, such as economic considerations or personal freedom. From this perspective, the South African government's decision to enforce strict lockdown measures—such as curfews and travel bans—was a moral imperative. in line with Kant's principle that people should be treated as ends in themselves, not as means to an abstract collective goal, the measures - which were applied equally across the entire country, display the commitment to treating every individual with inherent dignity and respect. However, in Afro-communitarianism, this justification of the lockdown restrictions gives rise to limitations in its application, particularly in a diverse South African society. Unlike deontological ethics, Afro-communitarianism emphasizes individuals' interconnectedness within their communities and the importance of cultural context. It

contends that ethical decisions should reflect the unique social structures, cultural practices, and historical contexts of the people they impact. This focus on communal values challenges the universality of deontological principles, mainly when applied without considering the lived realities of communities that rely on social bonds, communal caregiving, and traditional practices.

South Africa, a country dominated by underdeveloped townships and rural areas, relies on the backbone of communal living, and traditional practices form the foundation of daily survival. Elders - custodians of cultural wisdom and social cohesion, play a crucial role in these communities by ensuring that means of survival rather than the formalized workmanship remain in place for the survival of families and, ultimately, communities. The strict lockdown measures, which were implemented uniformly across the country, disrupted these important social structures. The isolation of elders and placing a stigma on them as a "vulnerable group" halted these practices of communicating wisdom and knowledge to the next generation. Moreover, this led the young persons within communities as a "tool" that had the duty of protecting the well-being of the elders, whilst the elders were used as a means to an end of keeping the number of deaths low within the country by remaining in isolation again going against the very principle of deontology of not using an individual as a means to an end. Afro-communitarian ethicists argue that these blanket measures, though well-intentioned, inadvertently undermined the very social fabric that strengthens communities in times of crisis. Again, proponents of Kantian ethics may argue that the imposition of lockdowns was a moral necessity, grounded in a universalizable duty to prevent harm. For example, mask mandates and isolation could be seen as fulfilling categorical imperatives, treating others not merely as means but as ends—protecting them from infection. Yet from an Afro-communitarian perspective, these duties must

arise from relational obligations embedded in community life, not abstract moral reasoning. Afro-communitarianism critiques the impersonal nature of Kantian universality, arguing instead that moral action must reflect lived social relationships and mutual accountability.

Afro-communitarian thinkers propose a more context-sensitive approach to public health measures, one that is deeply engaged with the cultural and social realities of the affected communities. This would result in the practical collaboration of government with local community leaders and elders in designing policies that reflect both the health needs and the communal practices central to these communities' well-being. The feasibility of these engagements during times of crisis might lead to a loss of precious time. However, the very non-existence of a pandemic or epidemic response plan prior is a failure to honour its duty of protecting and preserving life.

While deontological ethics advocates for universal measures grounded in moral duty, it can be critiqued for its lack of flexibility and sensitivity to the diverse cultural contexts in which those measures are implemented. The deontology approach overlooks the social dynamics that shape individual lives by focusing on applying its universal principles. This universal principle is only fair in an ideal situation where everyone has the same social dynamics, i.e., receives the same daily or monthly income, which is not the situation with South Africa. It is a country that still has societies that rely on informal labour for survival. Afro-communitarianism offers a comprehensive ethical response that acknowledges the centrality of community and relationality in the lives of individuals. In doing so, Afro-communitarianism offers a more inclusive public health response to public health threats whilst still recognizing the importance of protecting life and nurturing the essential communal relationships that allow societies to thrive.

The ethical debates surrounding South Africa's response to the coronavirus pandemic show the pull between deontology and Afro-communitarianism. While deontological ethics justifies strict lockdown measures as a moral duty to preserve life, Afro-communitarianism challenges this approach by highlighting that this moral duty was not entirely fulfilled as it resulted in further exploitation of specific individuals to protect the rest. Afro-communitarianism calls for public health responses that respect cultural traditions, promote social cohesion, and ensure that ethical decisions are grounded in the lived experiences of the people they affect. Afro-communitarianism offers a holistic and context-sensitive framework for navigating the ethical challenges posed by the pandemic, ensuring that both individual rights and communal ties are safeguarded.

Objections and Reponses to Utilitarianism school of thought

Utilitarianism, which prioritizes the greatest good for the greatest number, has been used to justify the strict measures during the lockdowns, which included measures like travel bans of any nature except for seeking medical attention and purchasing essential non-banned items and quarantines during the coronavirus pandemic. From a utilitarian perspective, the measures aim to minimize harm and reduce the spread of the virus, even if this comes at the cost of certain individual freedoms or economic losses. The only goal is to ensure the overall health and well-being of the population, even if specific groups or individuals bear a disproportionate burden. However, Afro-communitarianism has a distinct perspective. It emphasizes the importance of community, relationality, and solidarity. Utilitarianism operates through calculations of aggregate well-being; Afro-communitarianism focuses more on people's lived experiences within their social and cultural environments. Afro-communitarians argue that policies should balance the aim of protecting public health with respect for the

intricate relationships and communal bonds that form the foundation of many societies rather than the abstract decision-making of the Utilitarian. The utilitarian approach tends to favour universal interventions, such as blanket lockdowns, because they are seen as efficient tools for controlling the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, Afro-communitarianism critiques this one-size-fits-all approach for failing to account for the diversity of cultural practices and social networks central to many communities' cohesion.

In South African rural settlements, communal gatherings and family rituals are not just matters of personal preference—they are the cornerstone of maintaining emotional, material, and social support. When broad lockdown measures are enforced without consideration of these practices, they risk undermining essential support systems and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups. Nonetheless, Utilitarians may argue that harsh restrictions and sanctions—though burdensome—preserved more lives and thus ultimately protected communal welfare. Within this framework, temporary sacrifice of social rituals and communal gatherings was justified by the larger goal of reducing deaths. Afro-communitarianism, however, insists that communal harmony cannot be preserved by undermining the very social bonds that constitute it. Even if sanctions reduced infections, their long-term consequences—such as alienation, breakdown of reciprocity, and weakened identity—cannot be ethically dismissed.

Furthermore, while utilitarianism justifies temporary disruptions as a means of preventing greater long-term harm, Afro-communitarianism warns that even short-term measures can erode the social ties that are vital to communal life. In Afro-communitarianism, public health interventions should be evaluated based on their immediate epidemiological effectiveness and how they affect communities' relational

and cultural integrity. Utilitarianism's focus on universal measures can also lead to cultural insensitivity by treating individuals as interchangeable components of a collective whole and paying no attention to the unique needs of specific previously disadvantaged African communities. This approach can perpetuate systemic injustices, particularly for those whose cultural practices and lived experiences have historically been marginalized. In contrast, Afro-communitarianism calls for more culturally sensitive policies incorporating local knowledge and traditions. A powerful example of this can be seen in rural Ghana, where health initiatives that engage local healers and elders alongside health authorities have proven more effective and culturally appropriate than top-down mandates.

The voices of objection from utilitarianism show the ethical struggle of prioritizing efficiency instead of the need for cultural sensitivity. While utilitarianism emphasizes the broad societal benefits of universal measures, Afro-communitarianism underscores the importance of relational ties, community engagement, and cultural context. This perspective protects lives and preserves the social bonds essential for society's resilience. Utilitarian's questions whether Afro-communitarian norms are workable during acute public health emergencies, where rapid, centralised decision-making may be necessary, the time needed for community consultation could delay interventions and worsen outcomes. However, evidence from Ebola outbreak management in West Africa suggests that integrating local leadership structures into emergency responses accelerated uptake of public health measures without compromising timeliness (83).This demonstrates that Afro-communitarian approaches can be both culturally appropriate and operationally efficient when embedded in pre-established disaster readiness plans.

The main problem with applying a utilitarian approach within South Africa lies in the ethical injustices promoted for the minorities by it is a universal approach. Afro-communitarianism proves to be an inclusive and effective response to public health crises—ensuring that policies do not merely aim to maximize well-being by preserving life but also strengthen the communal ties essential for societal survival, thriving during the times of the crisis and recovery following the crisis. This relational approach provides a more sustainable foundation for addressing challenges both now and in the future.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an in-depth discussion of Afro-communitarianism as a guiding moral philosophy for evaluating the ethical validity of social sanctions in public health during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly within South Africa. I have demonstrated how Afro communitarianism, which is deeply rooted in values of relational rights, solidarity, and moral reciprocity, provides an important perspective in assessing public health interventions through the lens of their purpose and result. Additionally, I have distinguished this approach from Western ethical theories, highlighting its emphasis on communal bonds, shared responsibility, and the significance of social interconnectedness.

Through this lens, I have analysed the role of social sanctions during the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa, arguing that while these measures sought to control the spread of the virus, they conflicted with the fundamental principles of Afro-communitarianism and, in actual fact, defeated the purpose of wanting to control the spread in order to preserve lives. Implementing such restrictions undermined communal solidarity, disrupted relational obligations, and weakened the moral

cohesion that sustains social harmony in African societies. Instead of reinforcing unity, these measures contributed to social alienation, diminished the communities' trust in the government's ability to see us through the pandemic, and compromised the overall well-being of individuals and their communities.

In responding to critiques from various ethical traditions, I have defended the Afro-communitarian position. Firstly, I defended Afro-communitarianism's position against that of Ethics of Care, which underscores relational responsibility and empathy; it does not fully address the broader social structures that Afro-communitarianism regards as fundamental. I did the same against the deontological ethics objections, with its strict emphasis on duty and universal moral imperatives. It overlooks the nuanced obligations that arise within the relational context of African societies. Lastly, I responded to the objections to utilitarianism's pursuit of maximizing overall well-being, which often disregards the cultural considerations and communal responsibilities vital to maintaining social equity and equality – a key and important phenomenon in Africa, considering past atrocities.

Of note is that one of the key issues raised in this chapter is the extent to which pandemic restrictions, though enacted to safeguard health, failed to align with Afro-communitarian values of collective participation and inclusivity in decision-making. The exclusion of community voices from the policy-making process led to measures that were imposed externally rather than arising organically from within the community. This contradicts the Afro-communitarian belief that moral obligations should emerge through communal consensus. The failure to incorporate these perspectives resulted in public health measures that did not reflect the lived experiences and ethical priorities of those most affected. Thus, observed during the pandemic, there was little to no cooperation from the public regarding adhering to the measures, i.e., wearing masks

and social distancing, to an extent where the SANDF was deployed across towns and townships to ensure compliance with the regulations.

This chapter also underscores balancing public health objectives with cultural awareness. From an Afro-communitarian perspective, health policies should aim to mitigate harm and strengthen communal ties. Public health responses must be designed in a way that upholds, rather than weakens, the moral and relational foundations of African communities. Punitive approaches such as fines and imprisonment should be reconsidered in favour of methods emphasizing community engagement and collective responsibility.

By critically engaging with objections from the Ethics of Care, deontology, and utilitarianism, I have reinforced the view that Afro-communitarianism presents a more contextually relevant and ethically sound approach to public health in African societies. While care ethics aligns with Afro-communitarian ideals in some ways, it does not emphasize collective moral responsibility to the same extent. Deontological ethics, with its rigid structure, does not allow for the adaptability required in communal obligations. Utilitarianism, despite its focus on achieving the greatest good, often neglects the real-life social dynamics and ethical priorities of particular minorities who are still part of our communities.

The discussions in this chapter prove that future public health responses should prioritize community-driven solutions, ensuring that interventions are informed by the moral and cultural frameworks of the societies they seek to protect. The failure to consider Afro-communitarian values in pandemic policy-making resulted in measures that, theoretically, might effectively reduce transmission but still raised significant ethical concerns. Compliance can only be achieved through joint and mutual

agreements. Moving forward, governments and health institutions must adopt more inclusive and participatory approaches to ensure that they align with the ethical traditions that shape communal life and uphold the principle of social acceptability in public health.

Additionally, this chapter highlights the necessity for further exploration into the long-term impact of pandemic restrictions on Afro-communitarian societies. While the immediate effects of these measures have been documented, their broader social and psychological consequences require further study. Future research must consider examining ways Afro-communitarian communities can sustain their ethical values and social structures while accommodating necessary public health measures. Incorporating Afro-communitarian insights into bioethical discussions will be key in guiding the development and implementation processes of policies that do not simply enforce compliance but foster a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity.

The overall lesson from this discussion is that ethical decision-making in public health cannot be detached from cultural and moral considerations. Afro-communitarianism strongly opposes policies that prioritize efficiency over the lived experiences of the people where that policy is being implemented. The failure of the government to integrate cultural values into public health strategies gives room to the alienation of the very communities they seek to protect. In such cases as the pandemic, community dialogue, respect for traditional knowledge, and fostering collective decision-making are paramount.

The response to the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the tension between government-imposed restrictions and the autonomy of communities to determine how best to safeguard their members. Communal participation is integral to social and

moral life within Afro-communitarianism. Excluding communities from decision-making undermines ethical legitimacy and weakens public health interventions' effectiveness. Public health strategies that ignore cultural and ethical contexts are unlikely to succeed long-term, eroding trust and diminishing cooperation.

To better align future public health responses with Afro-communitarian values, governments must engage community leaders in policy-making to ensure that interventions respect communal ways of living while still achieving the desired health outcomes. The failure to do so risks repeating the same mistakes observed during the coronavirus pandemic, where restrictions, though medically necessary, ultimately caused social disintegration and distress.

The principles of Afro-communitarianism highlight the importance of holistic well-being, where health is understood as physical survival and social, emotional, and spiritual flourishing, similar to health, health promotion, and public health. Therefore, public health measures must reflect this broader understanding. In doing so, applying measures and restrictions during a time of emergency must ensure that efforts to contain disease do not come at the expense of cultural integrity and social solidarity. The public disruptions and street action in South Africa caused by the pandemic restrictions should serve as a reminder that ethical policy-making is most effective when it resonates with the values and lived experiences of the people it seeks to serve. Available modelling from the South African COVID-19 Modelling Consortium (2021) estimated that strict lockdown measures may have prevented approximately 20,000 deaths in the first year of the pandemic(84). However, Stats SA reported a net loss of 2.2 million jobs in the same period, disproportionately affecting informal workers, with lasting harm to food security and education continuity(85, 86). This trade-off reflects

the moral tension at the heart of this thesis: whether the potential preservation of life justifies the deep erosion of social cohesion, livelihoods, and communal identity

In conclusion, Afro-communitarianism offers a compelling and holistic ethical framework for assessing the permissibility of social sanctions during public health crises. As it prioritizes collective well-being, shared obligations, and the intrinsic value of community relationships, Afro-communitarianism proves the unjust ways and impact of restrictive policies that fail to acknowledge the ethical significance of social cohesion. As reflected on the lessons learned from the coronavirus pandemic, future public health policies must be scientifically informed and ethically and culturally responsive. Forging the integration of Afro-communitarian principles into policy design will ensure that interventions uphold dignity, solidarity, and the shared flourishing of African communities.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic in South Africa presented an unprecedented ethical dilemma, directly placing the necessity of public health measures against the deeply rooted cultural values and communal practices of the nation. The government's decision to enforce one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, intended to curb the spread of the virus, inadvertently disrupted essential cultural traditions and the social fabric that sustains many South African communities. This crisis illuminated the need for a more culturally sensitive approach to public health—one that acknowledges the significant role of Afro-communitarian values in shaping both individual and collective well-being.

Afro-communitarianism, which prioritizes interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and the preservation of communal life, presents a more robust ethical framework for understanding the challenges posed by the pandemic. While traditional Western ethical theories such as care ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism have been used to justify public health measures, they fall short of addressing the profound cultural implications of such interventions, particularly in societies like South Africa, where communal values and social bonds are foundational to survival and identity. Afro-communitarianism challenges these frameworks by emphasizing that the well-being of individuals cannot be separated from the communities to which they belong. The disruptions caused by the lockdown, including the prohibition of funerals and other cultural gatherings, went beyond public health concerns—they undermined the very social and emotional support systems that are vital to individual and collective resilience in times of crisis. The ethical response to the pandemic in South Africa must

extend beyond the narrow scope of protecting individual lives through physical health measures alone. Afro-communitarianism offers a holistic perspective that integrates the protection of life with the preservation of cultural identity and social cohesion. While care ethics focuses on relational well-being and solidarity, it is often insufficient in its cultural sensitivity, as it tends to prioritize individual needs and the immediate protection of vulnerable groups without considering the broader context in which these individuals live. In contrast, Afro-communitarianism recognizes that cultural practices—such as communal grieving, caregiving, and shared responsibilities—are integral to the health and well-being of individuals. Public health measures that fail to account for these practices risk eroding the very foundation of communal life, which in turn threatens the long-term social stability and mental health of communities. The South African government's reliance on punitive measures, including fines and arrests for non-compliance, further exacerbated the situation, particularly in marginalized communities already struggling with high unemployment, economic insecurity, and informal labour dependencies. In a country where a sizeable portion of the population survives on daily wages or community-based support, the blanket application of lockdown measures, without consideration of these socio-economic realities, led to severe inequalities. The imposition of hefty fines and the threat of imprisonment only deepened these disparities, as vulnerable populations were further marginalized and punished for struggling to comply with regulations, often through no fault of their own. These measures not only exacerbated financial hardship but perpetuated a cycle of poverty, making it even harder for individuals to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and medical care. Afro-communitarianism critiques this approach by advocating for community-driven solutions that address non-compliance in ways that respect cultural norms and promote collective responsibility. Rather than relying solely

on the imposition of fines; the government could have engaged local leaders—both traditional and political—to create culturally appropriate strategies that both enforced public health measures and protected the social fabric. Community leaders could have facilitated conversations about how to balance public health with cultural obligations, and financial support programs could have been designed to help mitigate the economic damage caused by the lockdown. These measures would have ensured that vulnerable groups were not left behind and were able to meet their financial and social needs during this challenging time. Moreover, the ethical objections raised by care ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism—while grounded in valid concerns about public health and safety—reveal the limitations of applying universal principles to a diverse and complex society like South Africa. Deontological ethics, with its emphasis on categorical duties, fails to account for the unique cultural context in which South Africans live, where social cohesion and communal interdependence are central to survival. Similarly, utilitarianism's focus on the greatest good for the greatest number disregards the cultural significance of community ties and the disproportionate burden placed on marginalized groups during the lockdown. These frameworks, though useful in some contexts, lack the flexibility and cultural sensitivity required to address the specific ethical challenges faced by African communities during the coronavirus pandemic. By integrating the values of solidarity, cultural respect, and communal responsibility, Afro-communitarianism offers a more sustainable and effective approach to managing the complexities of pandemics. In the case of South Africa, a public health response rooted in Afro-communitarian principles would have ensured that the government's efforts to protect health did not come at the cost of eroding cultural practices and social cohesion. This approach would have empowered communities, promoted greater compliance, and ultimately fostered a more resilient

and equitable response to the pandemic. As we look ahead, it is essential to incorporate Afro-communitarian values into future public health strategies, ensuring that both individual lives and communal ties are safeguarded in times of crisis, particularly in a country where the majority is marginalized.

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