

Paradoxes of knowledge, management, and knowledge management in Africa:

An editorial introduction

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The discipline of management and organization has been presented as being rife with paradox. Cameron and Quinn (1988) referred to a paradox as a concept embracing contradiction and the clashing of ideas, “contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that are present and operate equally at the same time” (p. 2). For Van de Ven and Poole (1988, p.22) paradox refers to “the real or apparent contradiction between equally well-based assumptions or conclusions”. More recently, Smith and Lewis (2011, p.382) deemed paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”. A burgeoning literature on paradox, plurality, contradiction, and dialectics (Cunha, Gomes, Mellahi, Miner,& and Rego, 2020; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016) has mostly treated the theme in accordance to traditions of East and West and even from disciplinary areas as distant as quantum theory (Hahn & Knight, 2019). Yet, we have until now failed to systematically analyze paradox lessons from African organizations.

From an Eastern perspective, paradox has been approached occasionally through a Buddhist lens (Simpson & Berti, 2019) but mostly through that of ancient Chinese philosophies, such as the perspective of Yin-Yang balancing (Li, 2016). The Yin-Yang lens emphasizes the importance of holistic and dynamic balancing and frames paradox as a co-existence of synergy and trade-off, thereby treating opposite elements as not only partially conflicting but also partially complementary. From a Western perspective paradox has an important philosophical lineage dating back to the ancient Greeks, which challenges the confidence in common sense assumptions and introduces the notion of ontological plurality, sometimes confronting organizations with the absurd (Berti & Simpson, 2019). As a result, theories framing managerial knowledge have been dominated by a Western epistemology with some important Eastern incursions. As an outcome there is a propensity for a “universalizing” mode of theory building rather than a truly endogenous understanding of organizations and their paradoxes in

their specific contexts (Jackson, 2013). Western-based management theories may fail to capture non-Western concepts and philosophies (Holtbrugge, 2013), including their contradictions and paradoxes, such as those related to the construction of indigenous knowledge and the translation of foreign management knowledge.

In a comprehensive review of the literature on management of knowledge in Africa, Zoogah and Nkomo (2013, pp. 9) assert that “there is a dearth of meaningful management knowledge in Africa”. Various other scholars argue that the existing theoretical frameworks and managerial practices have been imported (mostly from the West) without taking sufficient account of the local context. Hence the need for the development of management theories more suitable to the context of Africa (Amankwah-Amoah, Boso, & Debrah, 2017; Angwin, Mellahi, Gomes, & Peter, 2016; Gomes, Vendrell-Herrero, Mellahi, Angwin, & Sousa, 2018). For instance, while managerial knowledge and practices in African organizations have been mostly shaped by individualistic, instrumentalist, and competitive Western theories and concepts, organizations face the paradox of having to operate in socio-cultural settings influenced by “Ubuntu”, a philosophical trait characterized by collectivistic, paternalistic, and interdependent reciprocal obligations (Kamoche, Chizema, Mellahi, & Newenham-Kahindi, 2012). These few examples demonstrate the need for development of more Africa-centered knowledge, management, and knowledge management pertaining to the cultures of Africa.

Among the various concepts and philosophies, not much is known about the expression of organizational paradoxes as related to the African context, but paradoxes do not emerge in social voids. In this special issue we engage with the paradoxes of knowledge, management, and knowledge management in the African context. African traditions diverge from those in the West but very few papers have explored plurality, paradox, and contradiction in the context

of Africa (e.g. Cunha, Fortes, Gomes, Rego, & Rodrigues, 2019). This is unfortunate because differences in history, institutions, cultures, habits, and traditions, can shed important light on the relationship between paradoxes and the contexts of their occurrence.

Organizational tensions with paradoxical potential in Africa may involve the need to develop short-term flexibility while preparing organizations for the long run (Sarala, Cooper, Junni, & Tarba, 2014), combine foreign management knowledge with local culture (Gomes, Sahadev, Glaister & Demirbag, 2015; Perrin, Rolland & Stanley, 2007), offer standardized products or adapt them to local markets (Ang & Massingham, 2007), share knowledge by traditional or technological means (Kruger & Johnson, 2010), and deal with the tensions and contradictions of a colonial legacy in a post-colonial (and anti-colonial) era (Nkomo, 2011).

Different contexts can elicit specific forms of contradiction leading to different paradoxes. Some contexts can tolerate contradictions more than others (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) and some habits may differ from what is institutionalized in the West. We thus considered the time ripe to explore the specificities of knowledge, management, and knowledge management in Africa. We invited both conceptual and empirical submissions to explore the paradoxes of knowledge, management, and knowledge management in the African context seen through various theoretical and practical lenses, in order to examine the cultural subtleties and complexities of paradox, as well as the methodologies suited to analyze this phenomenon in both the national and international arenas, with a particular emphasis on the African context.

The result of our call is materialized in this special section, composed of five papers addressing various aspects related with paradoxes of knowledge management in Africa. These range from conceptual, qualitative case-study-based investigations to quantitative

studies covering a diversity of industries and countries including Angola, Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, and industries including, food and beverages, textiles, machinery and equipment, telecommunications, petrochemicals, medical, automotive, service sectors, and international and local NGOs operating in the third sector.

The study developed by Lannon and Walsh (this issue) examines the role of strategic partnerships on knowledge exploration and exploitation in the context of Africa, based on a qualitative multiple case study approach involving partnerships between non-governmental organizations in three African countries (Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe). By drawing on paradox theory, the authors examine how different types of paradoxes affect partnerships' responses to the ambidextrous knowledge exploitation/exploration duality. They use a framework involving paradoxes of learning (old and new knowledge), paradoxes of organizing (alliance structures), paradoxes of belonging (group and individual identity), and paradoxes of performing (consistency in roles and actions). In doing so they contribute to the field of knowledge management by identifying the key determinants of these responses and the impact of the different types of paradoxes that exist. For instance, they explore the paradoxical duality existing in the knowledge creation process by confronting the individualistic and instrumental knowledge and management practices of an international non-government organization (INGOIR), with collectivistic and interdependent Ubuntu-based practices of their African NGO partners who are more embedded in the local socio-cultural settings. Their results show that it is of utmost importance for international NGOs to

combine foreign management practices with local culture and adapt standard practices and procedures to systems of governance that are more relational and traditionally based.

Their findings show that while knowledge exploration and exploitation between partners was not adversely affected by the paradoxes of belonging and performing, the paradoxes of organizing had a more detrimental effect. This seemed to be the case because paradoxes of organizing are more rooted in tensions of culture, power, and epistemologies, which tend to be more enduring and difficult to change because of the simultaneous need for stability and change. Given the increasing number and importance of partnerships between international and local African NGOs, the findings of this study are of great interest to both academics and practitioners. For academics, it contributes to the development and dialog between different literatures (knowledge management, paradoxes, alliances, and ambidexterity), by examining their interplay in a unique context – the non-governmental sector in Africa. For practitioners, it helps policy makers, managers, and employees of international and local African NGOs to understand the importance and necessity of confronting and managing the paradoxical tensions of learning, organizing, belonging, and performing as a means for enhancing the benefits of international non-profit partnership programs.

The study developed by Wood and Bischoff (this issue) investigates, through a paradox lens, the role and impact of knowledge capabilities and knowledge sharing on organizational performance. Because of the context of the study – the South African clothing and textile industry – they investigate the paradoxes associated with the use of implicit and informal approaches, along with formal information systems-based approaches. Through a qualitative multiple case study approach of twelve small and micro South African textile firms, they examine the human dimensions of integrating knowledge in an emerging market context in

which chronic institutional deficits are obstacles to the development of knowledge and of competitive knowledge management practices. The results of the study demonstrate that an effective integration of knowledge cannot be structured and subsumed within a single managerial function, and rolled out as a strategic choice. Instead, it has to take into consideration the nuances and variations of the contextual conditions, which in some cases may require changing the existing firm structures and processes. Because of the importance of using implicit knowledge, which cannot be easily codified or formalized, firms tend to make greater use of informal knowledge management and sharing practices. However, the authors stress the importance of managing the paradoxical tension between formal and informal practices. They argue that successful firms also need to be able to implement formal policies, processes, and practices to be able to capture and incorporate external and internal knowledge, which results in more innovative practices across the value chain (from design to retail) in order to be able to cope with increasingly competitive and unpredictable business environments. However, given the existing limitations of formal training and management skills in South Africa, small textile firms must resort more to informal knowledge management practices and skills of workers, and improvised solutions, at both individual and collective communitarian levels, than to formalized conceptualizations of managing knowledge and people.

The study developed by Tigharsi, Bouguerra, Golgeci, and Rofcanin (this issue), draws upon the knowledge management, human resource management, and paradox literatures, to analyze the nature of paradoxes of labor mobility in an emerging market context. Through a qualitative approach involving interviews with employees who left their local firms and joined multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in Algeria, they compare and contrast the knowledge- and learning-related experiences of employees who worked in both local firms

and MNEs operating in Algeria, a country suffering from shortages of skilled labor. The context is particularly important for advancing the knowledge management and paradox literatures because of the paradoxical demands and challenges of combining local culture with foreign human resource practices imposed by the economic, cultural, and institutional idiosyncrasies of a developing country like Algeria.

The authors use two metaphors to illustrate the paradoxical tensions faced by employees who worked for both local firms and MNEs operating in Algeria. The first tension, designated “leaving roots *vs.* growing wings”, illustrates the case of employees leaving local firms and moving to MNEs to seek new opportunities and develop their skills and career. Tigharsi et al.’s (this issue) findings show that one of the main reasons why local employees prefer to join foreign MNEs is for learning and skill/competence enhancement. Through more elaborated and structured management practices, foreign MNEs provide access to global networks and mobility opportunities, new skills sets, and more attractive remuneration. However, their findings show a paradoxical situation in which talented employees decide to leave foreign MNEs to go back to local firms. Figuratively, they designate this second metaphor as “flying wings *vs.* remaining true to roots”. In this case, talented and well prepared employees who have developed their managerial capabilities and skills in MNEs decided to trade their greater reward and career opportunities to return to their roots and work for local firms that may offer them more stability, belonging, and flexibility. To conclude, Tigharsi et al. (this issue) discuss important theoretical implications of their study to the literatures of international human resource management, paradox, and knowledge management in terms of talent mobility, knowledge sharing and hiding, and human capital. They also discuss the implications for practice by highlighting the importance of talent management in emerging markets, where MNEs must think beyond financial rewards and career benefits and also consider other personal needs and socio-cultural expectations.

The study developed by Vendrell-Herrero, Darko, and Ghauri (this issue) analyzes African “paradoxes of learning”, examining the productivity outcomes of signaling and service competences in samples of exporting and domestic firms. By drawing on the World Bank Enterprise Surveys conducted from 2009 to 2017 the authors construct a cross-sectional sample of 4,687 manufacturing firms, covering a wide geographical spectrum of 35 African countries. The study has two fundamental results. First, the authors find that service competences (measured as the access to service knowledge, i.e. the density of knowledge-intensive business services firms in the city in which the manufacturing firm has its headquarters) are positively related to firm productivity among exporting firms, whereas there is a negative link between service competence and productivity for domestic firms. This finding is paradoxical, fitting with the change *vs.* stability paradox (Graetz and Smith, 2008). Gaining service competences is important for serving advanced economies (more technologically advanced than African countries) but not for serving domestic markets. It is precisely for this reason that accessibility to service knowledge is a key enabler of productivity enhancement for exporting firms, but is a liability for domestic firms, which serve a relatively technologically stable domestic market.

In their second result, the authors show that signaling (or outward looking) competences are productivity enablers for domestic firms, a result that washes away almost completely in the sample of exporting firms. This paradoxical evidence can be examined through the exploration *vs.* exploitation paradox (March, 1991). While exploration grounds future competitiveness at present cost, exploitation produces short-term increases in performance and productivity. African exporting firms use signaling as a way to ground future competitiveness in foreign markets, so their effects are not fully tangible in the short term. However, as domestic firms use signaling competences to exploit their competitive

advantages in the domestic market, the observed effect in the short run is stronger. The novel empirical approach undertaken in Vendrell-Herrero et al.'s study shows that contextualization of existing knowledge management theories matters, opening different lines of inquiry to analyze other established paradox lenses in Africa.

The study developed by Nansubuga and Munene (this issue) discusses the benefits but also the limitations of importing western knowledge into Africa. In doing so, these authors highlight the need for “awakening” an African episteme based on the Ubuntu way of living. They discuss different paradoxes within the existing knowledge management models and provide alternative knowledge management perspectives that recognize culturally embedded meaning and management practices in the African context. They argue that this is especially important because in Africa knowledge is created through a combination of skills and philosophies that are grounded on cultural values and folklore, and that are spontaneously developed by societies through their daily interaction with their surrounding environment. They argue that the blunt non-contextualized application of western knowledge and knowledge management practices built on standardized frameworks may lead to confusion, anxiety, and resistance, as they seem to be in conflict with the socio-cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and habits of Africans.

To illustrate this point, they discuss some of the paradoxical tensions faced by African managers. For instance, they highlight that while the African Ubuntu philosophy and culture is based on communal collaborative values that are characterized by a strong sense of empathy for others, dignity, and the common good, western management practices, values, and models promote individualistic competitive behaviors. They highlight other interesting examples such as the use of gifts to superiors and the hiring of one's own relatives and friends. They argue that while western management practices and values tend to interpret

these practices as signs of corruption and nepotism, Ubuntu-based communal values and practices may see them as moral actions reflecting gratitude, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, and reciprocity, thereby expressing the paradoxical and nuanced meaning of “positive” management practices in organizations (Cunha, Rego, Simpson, & Clegg, 2020). Thus, Nansubuga and Munene assert that knowledge and knowledge management practices in Africa have been seriously affected by paradoxes arising from the acquisition of concepts and knowledge management practices that are inadequate to Africa’s socio-cultural context. In response, they adopt metaphysical and dramaturgical perspectives to propose an integrated framework for appropriate utilization of the Ubuntu philosophy to develop knowledge and knowledge management practices. In doing so, they identify several paradoxes and suggest how they can be managed to improve knowledge and people management in Africa. The metaphysical perspective, embedded in two knowledge dimensions (priori and posteriori), is used to discuss the conflicting views regarding the content and process of knowledge management. The dramaturgical perspective is used to highlight the importance of knowledge management and practices that recognize the employees’ expectations and that are able to rectify paradoxical interpretation of ideas. In conclusion, although they acknowledge that the Ubuntu knowledge framework is not superior to other management frameworks, or applicable to all contexts, they argue that it can promote knowledge development and management practices that are adequate to the socio-cultural features of organizations in Africa.

Final note

The articles in this special section can be read as an invitation to engage in a both-and type of exercise: to deepen existing theory on paradox and to expand it by submitting it to conceptual and empirical scrutiny in the African context. Overall these papers indicate that paradoxes are

products of their unique contexts and that the aspiration to compose a universal theory of paradox must, paradoxically, be enriched by the consideration of the local conditions of its own emergence. Paraphrasing Tolstoy, if universal management practices are all similar, plural and paradoxical practices are paradoxical in their own specific ways. With this note we welcome our readers to this collection of articles on the complex and culturally bounded world of paradox.

Acknowledgments

We are proud of having successfully completed this special section, which is certainly contributing to the knowledge management and paradox literatures in the context of Africa; an often neglected context that is nevertheless assuming an increasingly pivotal role in the globalized world. We hope that this special section will inspire and lead to further research and, consequently, to the development of knowledge and management practices in the context of Africa. The authors of the individual contributions deserve the main credit for the effort, determination, and quality put into their work through several rounds of thorough reviews. We would also like to express our gratitude to Manlio Del Giudice, Shlomo Tarba, and Armando Papa for their diligent support throughout the entire process. We are also grateful for the effort and invaluable contribution of all the reviewers of the special section; their knowledge, rigor, patience, and constructive comments and feedback were key to the success of the special section. Emanuel Gomes and Miguel Pina e Cunha would also like to acknowledge financial support from Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/ 2013) by LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER007722 and Social Sciences Data Lab, Project 22209.

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