

## **Ethical Leadership: Lessons from Africa for International Management**

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Joana S. P. Story, Nuno Guimarães-Costa, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Ken Kamoche and Arménio Rego

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#### Article abstract

Scholarship at the interface of ethics, leadership and organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is still scarce. We draw from literature about leadership in Africa to identify three research streams (functional, cultural, and critical) and use these streams to make sense of research on ethics, organizations and leadership in SSA, as well as to analyze opportunities for research. We propose four interpretative approaches allowing the advancement of research in the field of ethical leadership in SSA. More diverse research on SSA is important for it allows the development of textured theories on the context and opens possibilities for revitalizing organization theory.

# Ethical Leadership: Lessons from Africa for International Management\*

Leadership éthique : leçons de l'Afrique pour le management international

Liderazgo ético: lecciones de África para la gestión internacional

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## ABSTRACT

Scholarship at the interface of ethics, leadership and organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is still scarce. We draw from literature about leadership in Africa to identify three research streams (functional, cultural, and critical) and use these streams to make sense of research on ethics, organizations and leadership in SSA, as well as to analyze opportunities for research. We propose four interpretative approaches allowing the advancement of research in the field of ethical leadership in SSA. More diverse research on SSA is important for it allows the development of textured theories on the context and opens possibilities for revitalizing organization theory.

Keywords: Ethics, leadership, Sub-Saharan Africa, Cultural values, Post-colonial theory

## Résumé

Recherche sur l'interface entre l'éthique, le leadership et les organisations en Afrique sub-saharienne (ASS) sont encore rares. Nous nous appuyons sur la littérature relative au leadership en Afrique pour identifier trois courants de recherche (fonctionnel, culturel et critique) et utilisons ces courants pour donner un sens à la recherche sur l'éthique, les organisations et le leadership en ASS, ainsi que pour analyser les opportunités de recherche. Nous proposons quatre approches interprétatives permettant l'avancement de la recherche dans le domaine du leadership éthique en ASS. Une recherche plus diversifiée sur l'ASS est importante car elle permet le développement de théories texturées sur le contexte et ouvre des possibilités de revitalisation de la théorie des organisations.

Mots-Clés : Éthique, leadership, Afrique sub-saharienne, valeurs culturelles, théorie post-coloniale

## Resumen

Los estudios sobre la interfaz de la ética, el liderazgo y las organizaciones en el África subsahariana (ASS) siguen siendo escasos. Nos basamos en la literatura sobre el liderazgo en África para identificar tres corrientes de investigación (funcional, cultural y crítica) y utilizamos estas corrientes para dar sentido a la investigación sobre la ética, las organizaciones y el liderazgo en el ASS, así como para analizar las oportunidades de investigación. Proponemos cuatro enfoques interpretativos que permiten el avance de la investigación en el campo del liderazgo ético en el ASS. Una investigación más diversa sobre el ASS es importante porque permite el desarrollo de teorías texturizadas sobre el contexto y abre posibilidades para revitalizar la teoría de la organización

Palabras Clave: Ética, liderazgo, África subsahariana, valores culturales, teoría poscolonial

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With the emergence of new, culturally robust, and economically powerful players in the global business arena, leaders increasingly face the challenges of working ethically and effectively across continents and cultures. They influence and/or are influenced by the idiosyncrasies of the context where their organizations operate. In fact, the relationship between ethical leadership (Brown *et al.*, 2005) and the ethicality of the context where the leader operates is recursive (Brown & Trevino, 2006). On the one hand, ethical leadership is likely to contribute to ethical contextual development. On the other hand, ethical climate or ethical culture in organizations may influence the development of ethical leadership. As Brenkert (2019, p. 918) stated, “business ethics needs to view businesses in a broader social and political context.” This interaction between leadership and the situation is intrinsic to any leadership process. The challenge of the ethical leadership process is demanding in an environment such as Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), that has suffered the consequences of institutional fragility (Agbloyor *et al.*, 2016; Mishra & Maiko, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016), which leads some authors (e.g., Ncube, 2010) to declare that such a context negatively impacts organizational ethics. It is important to note, however, that the fragility of formal institutions might be compensated by informal ones, including culture and tradition (see, e.g., how Mangaliso, 2011, p. 23 sees *Ubuntu*, “rich with consideration for compassion and communality,” as a source of competitive advantage; see also Hicks & Waddock, 2016). We aim to explore challenges of ethical leadership in SSA informed by paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and conceptually explore the tensions and paradoxes specific to this context.

The need for ethical leadership is a global issue, as expressed by the 2007–2009 global financial crisis, which created a loss of confidence in organizations in the West (Nielsen, 2010). Responsible leaders can help address the basic business and economic issues of different regions including SSA (Berger *et al.*, 2011; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011). However, few have attempted to clarify the actions and attributes that define what it means to lead ethically across cultures (Resick *et al.*, 2011), including in Africa, and specifically SSA. Because this topic is important globally, systematizing knowledge about it is important for this region as it is in any other part of the world. This need is critical because, although some attributes of ethical leadership appear to be universal, the way they are practiced, understood and expected may differ significantly across cultures—and those differences matter for how ethics is enacted (Brenkert, 2019). For example,

one key indicator of ethical leadership is integrity. However, this concept may be expected and expressed in distinct ways in different cultural settings (Martin *et al.*, 2009), and may prove problematic where concerns exist about corporate governance (e.g., Kamoche *et al.*, 2012). Scholarly approaches to ethical leadership mostly proceed from a Western perspective and do not generally consider values or viewpoints of different cultures (Eisenbeiss, 2012). This is also problematic because, to effectively develop ethical leaders and to promote ethical contexts and environments, it is necessary, first, to understand the unique challenges to ethical leadership development posed by specific cultural environments rather than assume the superiority of “ethical” behavior imposed by more powerful narratives.

Given the foregoing, learning about ethical leadership in SSA is important. The business ethics literature, while acknowledging the need for ethical leaders in the region and even presenting some of the key challenges for their development (Ciulla, Luizzi, & Strijdom, 2011; Temple, 2011), is disjointed. SSA also remains relatively under-researched in fields of management, human resources and organization studies (Kamoche, 2011). As Zoogah *et al.* (2015, p. 79) noted, “one important part of the world—Africa—has remained essentially off researchers’ radar screen.” However, this situation is changing rapidly, and researchers have demonstrated that uniqueness of the SSA socio-cultural and institutional context challenges the notion that Western management practices are universally valid and applicable. Several established Western employment frames of reference are not appropriate to analyze and reflect upon socio-organizational factors that influence organizational functioning in SSA (Khan & Ackers, 2004). Management and leadership practices that clash with the traditional African social system and mindset may have perverse consequences for the legitimacy of organizations within communities and the whole society. It is thus necessary to build knowledge about the “rest” of the world (Ozkazanç-Pan, 2008).

With that in mind, the purpose of this article is two-fold. First, we seek to take stock of and organize the existing knowledge of leadership in SSA, in order to derive specific implications for ethical leadership. Secondly, based on a systematic analysis of the literature (explained in the “Methods” section), we describe four interpretative modes of leadership, organized in a model that relates the theoretical perspectives on ethical leadership with their scope of

implementation. This paves the way for future research. We thus join the recent debate on the importance of leading with character (Sturm, Vera & Crossan, 2017), with a focus on the case of SSA and ask: what are the major paradigms and theoretical approaches on SSA ethical leadership and how can they be used to enrich organizational and leadership theories by exploring the tensions and paradoxes triggered by this context? Paradox theory has enriched organizational theory but it is prematurely converging (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Studying under-researched settings can help to search for fresh insights, as tensions are necessarily situated, with different cultures expressing different tensions and responses to them.

To answer this question, we consider the overall context of business leadership in SSA, which has important implications for ethical leadership. We organize the paper by first presenting the historical and cultural context. We refer to some challenges SSA faces currently and how ethical leadership can have a significant impact on the region. Next we present the main paradigms of research on ethical leadership in SSA and the theoretical streams they configure. This will help identify how a research agenda may be developed, articulating the case of SSA with generic theories of leadership and organization, making theoretical insights.

## Ethical Leadership and Sub-Saharan Africa

We define SSA as the group of countries located south of the Sahara Desert. This region comprises 930 million residents (Jugurnath *et al.*, 2016) from 50 countries (Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/guide/afr-country-list.html>). While SSA and North Africa share several similarities (Bentahar, 2011), North Africa is predominantly Arab. Most North African people identify more with the Middle East than they do with the rest of the continent. Accordingly, several international institutions include SSA and North Africa (together with Middle East) in different regions (Schwab, 2015). While SSA countries have distinct histories, cultural habits and norms, as well as economic outlooks (Walsh, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016), a certain degree of homogeneity may be identified in terms of its industrial development, the ethos of post-independent imperatives for economic growth, and the “African thought system” (Kamoche, 1993, 1997, 2011). In fact, researchers in the field of sociology (e.g.,

Ahiazu, 1986), anthropology (e.g., Greenfield & Bruner, 1966), and management (e.g., Blunt & Jones, 1992; Khan & Ackers, 2004) suggest that despite the diversity of this region, there are some common features that appear to categorize most SSA countries (Awedoba, 2005). The term “Africanity” clusters these similarities. *Africanity* is the “special configuration of various features and cultural patterns that may be encountered in the study of African models of livelihood, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, even in languages, and artistic expression” (Awedoba, 2005, p. 21). Some of these have been defined as respect for others, the importance of the extended family, collectivism, and deference to authority (Blunt & Jones, 1992; Beugre & Offodile, 2001; Kamoche *et al.*, 2004; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). Having this in mind, and for the purposes of both readability and simplicity, throughout the rest of the article we will be using the terms Africa and SSA interchangeably.

SSA is one of the poorest regions in the world, with the lowest human capital index (World Economic Forum, 2017). The levels of poverty and the disparity in income distribution (Sembene, 2015) point to important imbalances in terms of resource allocation, power, and opportunity. Indeed, SSA countries share some significant challenges that impact on business today. The colonial past has left these countries with largely arbitrary borders (Marshall, 2015) that have continued to be a source of ethnic tension and power struggles, which have in turn impacted institutions building and functioning. What seems to be a poor *de facto* regulatory framework (as opposed to *formal* regulatory organizations) has lowered the incentive for direct foreign investment and increases uncertainty in doing business in Africa (Khan & Bamou, 2006; Faraole & Winkler, 2014). An educational system that needs improvement (World Economic Forum, 2016) has diminished the probability of societal change and risks capturing the conditions for economic under-performance in what could be seen as a self-perpetuating circle.

However, some advances have been made to curb these challenges. SSA countries have improved their competitive index by introducing sustainable financial policies, better management of inflation, and debt reduction. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the region has grown (World Investment Report, 2016). New tools such as the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), established in 2007, offers an annual assessment of the quality of governance in the nations of Africa. This highly comprehensive collection of data on African governance

offers important information and metrics (<https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/iia>) that may function as benchmarks for progress. Much of this is accounted for by the recent phenomenon of Chinese investments into the continent, with substantial implications for economic growth, infrastructural expansion, employment, and poverty reduction.

Developing effective ethical leadership in SSA is thus fundamental for the prosperity of the region (Berger *et al.*, 2011; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011). Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown *et al.*, 2005, p. 120). An integrative approach to ethical leadership (Eisenbass, 2012) includes four principles: humane orientation (treating others with dignity and respect), justice orientation (making fair and consistent decisions), responsibility and sustainability orientation (leader’s long-term view of success and their concern for society and environment), and moderation orientation (balanced leader behavior).

If ethical leadership can bring upon positive change, we can expect that more formal knowledge about it in the specific SSA context will contribute to a way of work in Africa that can hold on to all cultural characteristics and uniqueness while providing a better life and work opportunities to its citizens. Resick and colleagues. (2011) have found that SSA leaders *endorse* ethical leadership characteristics such as character/integrity, altruism, collective motivation, and encouragement as important. It is necessary to explore *how* those behaviors have conditions to be amplified in the contextual conditions discussed above, as well as how these can be interpreted and used in other areas of the world.

## Methods

We conducted a systematic review of the literature on ethical leadership in SSA. We started very broadly to include first *ethical leadership in Africa*, however, it became clear that there were few articles that addressed the topic directly and that their foci were very disparate. Thus, we further expanded the review to concentrate on *leadership in Africa* and looked for articles that had a focus on ethical leadership. Specifically, our steps went as follows:

1. To select the appropriate literature, we defined leadership broadly to include management, business ethics, international business, strategy, organizational behavior, human resources management, and organization studies as leadership is expressed in these different domains of organizational action. We consider that leadership is micro (at the levels of teams) but also strategic, at the level of organizations, influencing organization-related decisions that have a potentially important impact on overall organizational effectiveness or performance. Consistent with our focus on the topic of leadership, we restricted our review to articles that addressed issues relevant to the topic of general management and Africa. We did not want to limit our choice to include just “ethical leadership” as it implies that we are looking at a Western ethical leadership definition only.
2. We then conducted a computerized search on papers published in scholarly journals (PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, and Business Source Premier). We selected scholarly (peer reviewed journals) in English and the following Boolean/Phrase were used: “Africa” AND “Management” OR “Business Ethics” OR “Leadership” OR “Organizational Behavior” OR “International Business” OR “Strategy” OR “Human Resources Management” OR “Personnel Management” OR “Organizational Studies” NOT “Educational Leadership.” This initial search produced a total of 1,937 articles.
3. We narrowed the search to exclude articles that did not fit the topic of general management/leadership (i.e., excluded politics, water, and environmental management). The new search yielded a total of 247 articles. Because our focus was on leadership practices in a business environment, we also excluded articles from management education (not training or development), marketing, political leadership, strategy, entrepreneurship, and business. This new exclusion yielded a total of 162 articles. Analyzing the articles we were left with, we concluded that the vast majority of them were about South Africa.
4. To make sure our findings were not biased towards South Africa or any other specific country, we then excluded articles that focused on a single country, when that specific article contribution could not be expanded to the SSA region (for example articles that addressed specifically management problems related to a specific country—in the case of South Africa, discrimination and apartheid). This new exclusion criterion yielded a total of 66 articles.



5. We also allowed our network of studies to grow forward by double-checking the citations used in the articles selected. This allowed us to add another 8 articles to our review that matched the original criteria.

The process was fluid to make sure no major contribution was left behind. We do acknowledge that not all articles that have tested theories in countries in Africa made it through the review. Our focus was on SSA leadership and management and if the main focus of the article was not this one, it was not considered in the review.

### Analysis

Based on our process analysis, some initial findings were drawn. The leadership literature in SSA can be considered sparse and ranges from case studies of a very specific phenomenon to a more complex analysis of a variety of variables within management. Articles also varied in focus. Most of them analyzed human resource management and organizational behavior but some discussed internationalization and strategy. Considering the challenges of this complex literature, we observed that articles could be grouped into certain categories or research streams. We attempted to organize this by creating a template of this work. The process was as follows: first, one of the authors content-analyzed the abstract. Abstracts were revised and served to organize the literature around encompassing categories. Categories need to be sufficiently broad to allow for a general overview of the literature but also specific enough to be different from other categories. Emerging categorizations at data organization were discussed among the authors in search for consensus.

This process led to three streams, which we named as *functional*, *cultural*, and *critical*. Each stream involves a distinct line of research that, for the most part, do not crossover (with few exceptions). Thus, the streams appear to have three relatively coherent and distinct conceptual bodies. The theories and research within the theories are methodologically similar. The *functional* stream is centered on Western constructs of leadership and management. The *cultural* stream is centered on cultural values literature. The *critical* stream adopts postcolonial and critical management theory approach. These three streams seem to capture cumulative patterns of the leadership literature in Africa. In the next section, we outline these streams, including their key concepts, critical findings, underlying theory, methods, strengths, and weaknesses. While our

focus was on ethical leadership, we could not ignore what the research stream on studies on leadership was communicating, since the name “ethical leadership” may have a Western bias. Throughout the analysis we tried to stay as close as possible to the authorial intentions, without interpretations. By African values, ways of thinking, etc., we refer to something that appears as locally specific. The fact that an interpretive category is specific does not exclude it from being present in other contexts nor qualifies it as good or bad.

## Streams of Leadership Literature in SSAE

Below, we detail each of the streams that emerged from our analysis, and explain how they relate to ethical leadership. We illustrate each of the streams with representative articles, but it is important to highlight that our analysis was not restricted to these articles only but they are used as a way to illustrate the specificities of each stream.

### Functional Stream

The functional stream discusses how to do business in Africa, mainly from a Western perspective, i.e., using Western tools and best practices. Articles that focus on this stream assume that there is no need to reinvent the wheel, as what we know about leadership needs only to be adjusted to contingencies of the African context. This perspective focuses on a “translated” or a “blended” Western theory transplanted to the African context. Most of the empirical research in leadership in SSA adopts this perspective. We have included in Table 1 some of the articles that best represent it. Our analysis was not restricted to these articles but they are used as they illustrate the specificities of each stream.

Beugre and Offodile (2001), for example, take into consideration various aspects of Western management practices such as leadership, work motivation, organizational effectiveness, performance appraisal, and change, but at the same time, incorporate African values. Thus, the model they propose is a culture-fit approach that matches modern management theories (Western) and African values, such as transformational leadership, performance-based compensation, employee participation and empowerment, total quality, and collaborative management. They do acknowledge that management is not the same everywhere. In their own words, “the present paper does not advocate

**TABLE 1**  
**Functional Stream: Representative Works**

Article	Key Idea	Theory/Topics	Method	Focus/Implications
Beugre & Offodile (2001)	Cultural-fit model of management that blends traditional values and modern management techniques.	African cultural patterns (values and habits); leadership; motivation; organizational effectiveness; performance; change.	Conceptual	Managers should focus on transformational leadership practices, employee participation and empowerment, performance-based compensation system, have a future-oriented mentality, and be collaborative.
Beugre (2002)	Political and social changes in Africa have also changed the workplace, especially in search of organizational justice.	Justice theory; cultural values	Conceptual	Argues for increase in distributive, procedural, and interactional justice along with leadership strategies on how to do so.
Anakwe (2002)	HRM in Africa is a blend between western-style and African practices.	Human resources management; convergence, divergence; cross-convergence; cultural values.	Descriptive and empirical	Most HRM practices in Africa have started with a convergence approach; they have been modified based on how it worked. Managers need to start out with a HRM program that will adapt to the local environment versus waiting for it to adapt itself.
Nyambegera, Daniels, Sparrow (2001)	Individual values are a better predictor of job involvement than person-organizational fit is.	Human Resources Management; Person-Organizational Fit; Cultural Fit; Job Involvement; Value Orientations.	Empirical	Job involvement is related to individual values and not organizational context. Individuals who are more involved with their jobs, prefer to be subjugated and have the manager in power, they rather not be empowered.
Zoogah (2009)	Strategic and <i>not</i> traditional leadership is needed in Africa.	Strategic leadership; followership; cultural values; self-concept.	conceptual	Determinants of strategic leadership are proposed. Organizations and mentors need to focus on these characteristics to develop strategic leaders in Africa.

for a blind transfer of Western management theories and techniques to sub-Saharan Africa nor does it consider the supremacy of such models over indigenous knowledge systems. Rather, it suggests a combination of the best of the two knowledge systems” (Beugre & Offodile, 2001, p. 535).

In another work, Beugre (2002) studies the concept of organizational justice (Western perspective) and its application to the African context by considering African values such as collectivism and power distance. He concludes that organizational justice is important for African organizations and proposes ways for them to enhance the different types of justice. Anakwe (2002) focuses on this convergence (in which ways management practices are the same) and divergence (in which ways they have to be different) by looking at the case of Nigeria. Human resources practices should adopt, the author defends, a *blended* mindset. Zoogah (2009), similarly, looks at the role of strategic leadership in Africa by first describing its importance from a Western perspective, the need for it, and finally how to develop strategic leaders in African organizations by taking into account African cultural values. Finally, Nyambegera *et al.* (2001) discuss the impact of HRM and this individual-organizational fit on job involvement of Kenyan employees. The authors took the job involvement construct (Western perspective) and adapted it to the African context using African values (such as relation to nature, basic human nature, human activity, and relationship).

Thus, the general idea in this perspective is that theories of leadership and organizational behavior (i.e., transformational leadership, justice, participation, empowerment, human resources management, strategic leadership) add knowledge to the field and we need to adjust these theories to the African context by paying attention to indigenous values. This is done in multiple ways, by well-known theories such as Hofstede’s (2001) cultural values or the GLOBE project (House *et al.*, 2004; it should be noted that these models have been criticized as providing a static, uniform cross-sectional picture of an evolving phenomenon; e.g., Williamson 2002). However, a qualitative perspective also has been used to describe the environment.

In this stream, the focus seems to be more on guiding foreign managers on how to manage in Africa versus aiding African managers. Often, local managers’ knowledge is underutilized. Berger *et al.* (2011) state that responsible and ethical leadership requires equal treatment of all managers, including local ones. Thus, one key characteristic of this perspective is that Africa constitutes the background and not necessarily the key focus of the papers centered in Western theories and their respective application. In order to develop ethical leadership in Africa, this perspective raises important concerns, as it does not take the African context fully into consideration. Thus, the Western perspective of ethical leadership may be prevalent in this stream, despite attempts to contextualize Africa using cultural values studies.

## Cultural Stream

The cultural stream adopts a locally sensitive African perspective, attentive to local specificities and contingencies (Cunha *et al.*, 2017). While articles from the functional perspective translate the Western theories in relation to the African context, in this paradigm the context takes precedence. Works within this stream criticize the functional perspective and state the need for scholars to understand African leadership without a dominant Western influence. Our sample of articles illustrates this orientation (Table 2).

Blunt and Jones (1997) argue that Western leadership and management theories are limited in explaining leadership in Africa, thus they indicate the need for an African model of leadership that takes into consideration indigenous characteristics because that seems to benefit African managers. Other authors focus on a more specific African value, *Ubuntu* (Mangaliso, 2001). *Ubuntu* was described by Mangaliso (2001, p. 24) as “the foundation for the basic values that manifest in the ways African people think and behave towards each other and everyone else they encounter.” That author then proposed the ways *Ubuntu* can

**TABLE 2**  
**Cultural Stream: Representative Works**

Article	Key Idea	Theory/Topics	Method	Focus/Implications
Blunt & Jones (1997)	Western or “American” leadership theories are limited in explaining leadership in Africa.	Transformational leadership; Hofstede’s cultural values.	Descriptive based on combination of theoretical perspectives.	Leadership in Africa is authoritarian/paternalistic with high focus on rules and procedures, resistant to change, unwilling to judge performance, centralized, and social networks are crucial to individual security.
Mangaliso (2001)	<i>Ubuntu</i> can bring competitive advantage to organizations.	<i>Ubuntu</i>	Descriptive; framework development	<i>Ubuntu</i> can have a positive impact on organizations by adjusting its on relationship with others, use of language and communication, decision-making, perspective on time and productivity, focus on wisdom, and differing belief systems.
van der Colff (2003)	Integration of <i>Ubuntu</i> to organizational cultural and practices.	<i>Ubuntu</i> ; leadership in Africa	Prescriptive; case-study based	Integrating <i>Ubuntu</i> to organizational practices should focus on leadership legitimacy, establishing a communal enterprise, and focus on value sharing.
James (2008)	Africa needs great leadership. Leadership development process needs to be understood.	Leadership development	Qualitative	Change in leadership behavior of African leaders is not a linear process and followed similar steps: contrasts between lives and conflicting views of leadership, external events provided self-assessment, internalization of learning (decided what to change), and response from others, which reinforced the change process.
Bolden & Kirk (2009)	Understanding leadership in Africa by Africans using constructivist perspective.	Hofstede’ cultural values; GLOBE’ s cultural values; constructivism	Appreciative inquiry	Universalistic models of leadership and leadership development are not effective in discovering Afro-centric leadership characteristics. Africans understanding of leadership have changed to believing that anyone can be a leader, leadership begins with self-awareness, leadership is relational, leadership should focus on the service of the community.



be used as a competitive advantage and how managers should take advantage of it. Similarly, Van der Colff (2003) proposed that *Ubuntu* could be integrated in organizational values and practices. The central dimension of *Ubuntu* is otherness: by emphasizing the need of the other focus is placed on the other; in the process, diverse needs must be harmonized, which opens tensions different from those that emerge in more individualistic settings.

Other authors (e.g., James, 2008) took a more qualitative approach in understanding how to develop leaders in Africa considering that most Western models do not work for the context in which they operate. Thus, they examined the specific context and questions that make African leaders change. The answers suggest that while the process of leadership development or change may be similar, the challenges are different from those of Western societies. In yet another qualitative approach, Bolden and Kirk (2009) investigated the African context in order to enable people to shape and become leaders, pointing out that the focus needed to be in Africa. In their words, “a more Afro-centric view of leadership requires the rejection of many aspects of the Western culture ... and a reconnection with African indigenous knowledge with its emphasis on solidarity and interdependence” (p. 74).

Thus, the general idea behind the cultural perspective is that we need to first understand Africa and, from that knowledge, apply or recognize cultural specific leadership and management characteristics that can contribute to the general field of leadership/management. The articles under this perspective seem to be more anecdotal and qualitative in nature. Finally, in this stream, Africa is the focus, not the background of management knowledge creation. Consequently, the research seems to be done to aid leaders and managers who work in Africa, rather than Westerners or expatriates in general.

Implications for developing ethical leadership in this stream are relevant because this stream focuses specifically on the SSA context. However, it may become problematic as the complexity of the context may bring multiple issues that, if all acknowledged, potentially neutralize ethical leadership (Temple, 2011). This orientation also recognizes key ethical leadership attributes (Eisenbeiss, 2012). For example, *Ubuntu* can be characterized as humane orientation with a specific societal history and culture.

## Critical Stream

The critical stream (for a sample, please see to Table 3) has a non-mainstream perspective on how African leadership has been represented from a post-colonial perspective. Scholarly work represented in this perspective challenges the current views to inform the need to understand Africans and how biased the world has perceived this geography because of colonial mindsets. Postcolonial theory aims to unveil the sovereignty of Western constructs (Prasad, 2003). In a widely-cited article, Ahiazu (1986) described the impact that Western practices had in the African workers and affirmed that lack of understanding and adaptation to the African societies led to negative stereotypes of Western managers with regards to the African worker. The premise is that the stereotype is false because it is very hard to understand behavior without acknowledging its underlying thought system. Similarly, Nzelibe (1986) argues that Africa had complex management concepts but these became corrupted by the contact with the Western world and by decades of exploitation and oppression that threatened local cultures and habits. Therefore, the core elements of traditionalism, communalism and cooperative teamwork have been replaced by what Nzelibe calls an assortment of pretentious structures. Thus, while the political environment may be different, the organizational environment after the colonization is still confusing. In his words:

*“... historical evidence indicates that the art of managing existed in Africa even in antiquity. Development of the principles of management was marred, however, by contact with the Western world, contact marked by decades of economic exploitation, social oppression, the importance of scientific management, all of which have left acute problems for management today”* (pp. 8-9).

Nkomo's (2011) review of the literature of African leadership from a post-colonial perspective found what seems to be a stereotypical colonial image of African leadership. A post-colonial perspective may provide a useful lens to understand leadership/management in Africa as it can examine African management without ignoring the impact that Western societies had in culture in Africa.

Using different types of descriptions, but still adopting a critical perspective, de Maria (2008) argues that most of Western prerogative is biased towards Africa, looking at metrics such as the Corruption Index and its flaws based on the primacy of Western values and measurement. In other words, Westerners measure African practices with a foreign lens, only to conclude that Africa does not score well in the measures they built in the first place for a different context.

**TABLE 3**  
**Critical/Post-Colonial Stream: Representative Works**

Article	Key Idea	Theory/Topics	Method	Focus/Implications
Ahiazu (1986)	To understand African behavior in the workplace it is imperative to understand the African thought system.	Sociology (Kant; Durkheim); thought-system	Descriptive, anecdotal—based on few studies and theoretical perspectives.	Managers in Africa need to understand how African makes sense of things and slowly try to change behavior.
Nzelibe (1986)	Describes the evolution of African Management thought and how West managers brought confusion to it.	Post-colonialism; thought-system; shared meaning.	Descriptive, anecdotal	Focus of managers in Africa need to go back to traditionalism, communalism, cooperative behaviors, and teamwork.
Nkomo (2011)	Describes how African management and leadership has been represented.	Post-colonialism; anti-colonialism	Review of literature	Challenges in understanding and naming “African Leadership or Management” due to focus on cultural relativism and stereotypes.
Bill de Maria (2008)	Explore biases in the Corruption Perception Index	Post-colonialism; corruption	Secondary-source analysis	Corruption Perception Index is a flawed instrument and West needs to be aware of that the discourse in corruption is biased, which leads to even more problematic assumptions.
Jackson (2011)	Develop a theory of cross-cultural interfaces.	Cultural values; cross-cultural management: dependency theory; post-colonialism.	Conceptual	Proposes a model for cross-cultural analysis in Africa.
Du Preez (2012)	Introduce a <i>pure</i> African style of leadership.	Pre-colonialism; leadership.	Case study	Shows an example of a leader that had no contact with Western theories of leadership and proposes his style as an alternative way of leading for prosperity.

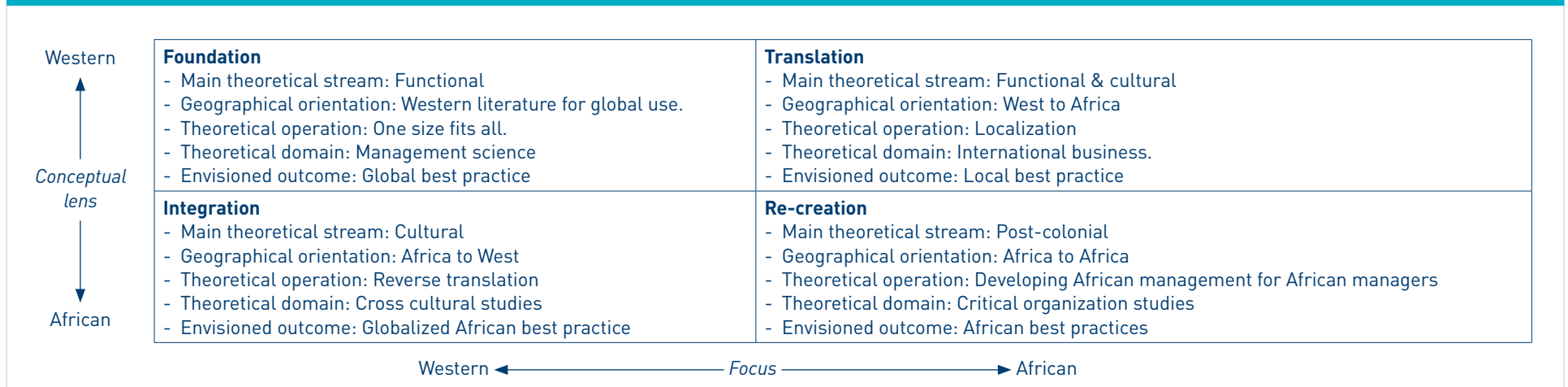
Jackson (2011), on the other hand, proposed a new way to consider the limitations of the functional and the cultural perspectives by taking post-colonialism into consideration—what he called cross-cultural interfaces. Cross-cultural interfaces acknowledge not only culture, but also power relations to inform action.

Thus, the critical perspective exposes the flaws of the current ways in which Africa has been studied and represented in leadership theories. Scholars in this stream of research argue that most of our formal knowledge has been biased because of Western ideals or impressions of Africa. They state that we cannot ignore the impact that colonization had on African culture and work behavior. An African perspective needs to start from the ground because previous knowledge is inadequate to develop a fair theorizing of African leadership and management. The critical perspective has implications for the study of ethical leadership in Africa, because it acknowledges the potential bias towards Western ideals and ethics, but also because it demonstrates that these concepts exist and have existed in Africa but have been “Westernized”. By paying attention to the context as a whole, we can explore the normatively appropriate behaviors in Africa and how these are different from the other regions, especially because of the complexity of the environment.

## Discussion: Interpretive Modes for a Research Agenda on Ethical Leadership

Grounded on the previously identified streams, we derive a typology that seeks to inform a research agenda for ethical leadership in Africa. This is based on two axes that we have interpreted as being at the core of the three paradigms: (1) the *source* of dominant theoretical lens (African or Western), and (2) the *target* of application, or consideration of the focus and conditions for implementation (Africa or the West) (Figure 1). Four approaches or interpretive modes emerge: *foundation* (Western focus and lens), *translation* (African focus, Western lens), *re-creation* (African focus and lens), and *integration* (Western focus, African lens). By putting together these two axes, the model not only highlights the interpretive modes that are already used by scholars in the development of literature on leadership, but also uncovers the opportunities of study and knowledge development in the region in the specific field of ethical leadership across approaches. For example, to develop more functional management systems, leaders need to understand how colonial thinking still influences management practice (Dibben *et al.*, 2016). This is especially the case of the last two quadrants: *re-creation* and *integration*.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Leadership and Management in Sub-Saharan Africa**



### Foundation

This quadrant depicts a Western, supposedly global, perspective on leadership. Scholars' contributions in this quadrant either choose to ignore the impact of their findings in other cultures or subscribe to the idea of a science of management founded upon universal foundations, following the belief that the concepts and theories developed are equally applicable in whatever cultural context (i.e., most of the early leadership theories). In terms of ethical leadership, this approach implies—even if not purposefully—an absolutist perspective in which the Western concepts of right and wrong are believed to be correct and globally applicable. As such, this interpretative mode does not recognize cultural difference in ethical perspectives.

Nonetheless, this quadrant presents relevant theoretical benchmarks concerning the development of knowledge on ethical leadership in Africa. Some managerial practices discussed in the West are understood to be sophisticated universal leadership best practices (Bloom *et al.*, 2012) and their adoption is

prescribed irrespective of geography, with only minor adaptations (i.e., Bass, 1996). Ethically, these practices have correspondence with global norms or hypernorms (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994), which serve as guidelines for compliance with generally (i.e., universally) accepted ethical behavior. This quadrant serves as the foundation for *translation*.

### Translation

This interpretive mode refers to literature that has emerged in the West and has subsequently been “translated” (Czarniawaska & Sevón, 2005; Logue, Jarvis, Clegg & Hermens, 2015) to the African context. It conforms with the idea that while traveling, ideas—including managerial ones—have to be adapted to local contingencies sometimes producing unexpected combinations (Cunha & Cunha, 2008). As such, this quadrant corresponds mainly to the adaptation of the functional stream of leadership literature described above, i.e., to the localization of universal ideas that are adapted to the unique African context, in which they can gain new meanings or nuanced expressions (Luthans, Van Wyk & Walumbwa,

2004). Most of the empirical research conducted in Africa fits in this quadrant. Moreover, the main focus of this research is on the international manager that goes to Africa and has to adapt, and not so much the behaviors and attributes of African manager or African organizations.

The implication for the advancement of knowledge about ethical leadership in Africa comes in the form of translating or *localizing* ethical leadership practices and concepts. These empirical and theoretical contributions enrich the opportunities for local practices and universal principles to meet and form behaviors or attitudes that respect the local traditions and moral codes without violating any universal moral principles (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994). Moreover, future contributions should go beyond the international manager to include the African manager and the African organization. Consequently, this quadrant opens opportunities for the development of localized best-practices in the field of ethical leadership in Africa. The translation quadrant serves as a critical basis for *re-creation*.

The foundation and translation interpretive modes are based on the functional stream. The contradictions within this stream represent an interesting ground for further research both when using management concepts as universal, and when attempting to translate them to the African reality. Within the functional stream, researchers may investigate the tension between good and bad management. Research has explored the template of good management as universal set of universal practices (Bloom *et al.*, 2012) and, within this stream, scholars may explore the gap between good practices and actual management practices in Africa. There is potential for an element of tension here because the presumed global best practices are strongly defined by American theories of management characterized by a number of contextual idiosyncrasies (see Donaldson, 1995) that often go unnoticed and unquestioned given the presumed scholarly supremacy of US journals.

### Re-creation

This interpretive mode is centered on concepts derived from an African perspective, to be implemented locally. This perspective includes the cultural and critical streams described above. Africanity is its focus. However, most of the works in this approach are critical in nature; thus, they project a critical stance over the way Africa has been studied and presented in the academic literature. While research on leadership often ignores the effects of colonialism on organizational

and management systems, the critical literature does not provide African or international managers with guidelines on how to do their job in the African context, nor provide prescriptions on how to improve their effectiveness.

In reviewing the literature of leadership in Africa, it seems that this quadrant opens rich opportunities for future research in the field of ethical leadership. Theory with an African twist that is implemented in Africa seems to be the most lacking, but at the same sense provides most of the opportunities. Bringing African managers and African organizations to the fore of research in order to re-create concepts such as ethical leadership or business ethics, would pave the way for the emergence of African best practices as seen from an African perspective. Given the unexplored nature of the research, studies focusing on these approaches are frequently qualitative (Locke, 2001) and informed by a constructivist paradigm. Inductive work (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967) may function as a methodological approach to improve the understanding of ethical leadership in Africa. These studies may serve as a conceptual platform for future research and provide contextually-rich analyses of the practices of African managers. The re-creation approach serves as a basis for *integration*.

### Integration

This interpretive mode includes the concepts and theoretical perspectives created within an African context, but its application also targets the West. The cultural stream (described above) fits this quadrant. The implications for the advancement of knowledge about ethical leadership can be illustrated with work on *Ubuntu* (Mangaliso, 2001) and how these can inform the larger literature on ethical leadership and management, namely via the consideration of the communitarian component of business, often lost in Western leadership theories. As Hicks and Waddock (2016, p. 448) argued, “The idea of *Ubuntu* is (...) a key to understanding both wisdom and dignity as core aspects of what it means to be an ethical leader today in business and, importantly, tomorrow, whether that leadership takes place in a business or some other context.” These authors also considered that the idea of *Ubuntu* is crucial to face problems in a “world fraught with ecological and social problems, political systems that are out of whack with democratic imperatives, organizations that demean and dehumanize many of their employees, and an economic perspective that places material wealth and financial interests over social, ecological, and human interests.” Research

within this quadrant should thus focus on African leadership moral practices that favor the interaction between the different parties to a business transaction with the goal of maximizing its output within mutually agreed ethical boundaries. Moreover, the role of institutions should be explored.

A promising research opportunity lies in the comparative investigation of moral leadership practices between Africa and the West and the identification of the institutional elements that raise them. This research could be enhanced by identifying the components of each practice that benefit the business transaction, as well as the institutional elements that could be changed to accommodate the African practice without sacrificing its ethical validity. In summary, it seems that following re-creation, integration provides the most opportunity for knowledge creation given that the least amount of research has been published with this perspective.

The cultural and critical streams inform the re-creation interpretative mode; whereas the cultural stream is at the base of the integration approach. The existing paradoxes within each of these streams presents important avenues of research for both re-creation and integration modes. Theories born in the USA (Clegg, 2014) are not necessarily applicable to other cultures than that of their origin. This leads to research opportunities raising from within the cultural stream: researchers may explore the tension between the West and the rest. For example, it is typically assumed that Western theories are more sophisticated—hence their capacity to travel globally. But Western management has been mostly silent about a number of issues that matter more in other parts of the world such as India or Africa. The inspiration from *jugaad*, as a template for low cost innovation (Prabhu & Jain, 2015), can be important to many entrepreneurs in any part of the world, as most entrepreneurs do not face munificent environments. In the same vein, the communitarian character of leadership in Africa can offer valuable lessons for more individualistic cultures. Conversely, the tension between colonial and post-colonial observed in the critical stream can serve to explore the tension between spontaneous and imposed templates beyond dualism. The study of the penetration of imposed colonial institutions and their mixing with local templates (Dibben *et al.*, 2016) may reveal nuanced dimensions of institutions and their influence over management practice.

## Further Avenues of Research Emerging from Tensions and Paradoxes Between Streams

Research opportunities within the framework of the interpretive modes also emerge from tensions and paradoxes existing between literature streams. The tension of functional and cultural will offer a privileged window to study local-global tensions, frictions and possible syntheses that can enrich the field of international management. The cultural vs. critical streams may be revelatory about divergence and convergence hypothesis. Longitudinal and historical research may be especially important to see these tensions unfolding in the long run as historical movements are typically slow and paradoxes manifest in the long run. Tensions between functional and critical may shed light on the tension between diffusion and rejection of business models. It is often assumed that good practices may be translated to work, but they may simply be rejected. It is even possible that they may cause ambivalent effects between a desire for adoption, given their presumed superiority, and a desire for rejection, because of lack of adherence to the local conditions.

In summary, the study of leadership and ethics may constitute a preferential arena to explore a number of tensions and paradoxes pervading organization theory. According to some authors, paradox theory is crystallizing prematurely around a number of tensions (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). As suggested by Cunha *et al.* (2019), the African contexts may contribute to release the study of paradox from the straightjacket of premature convergence and reveal a number of tensions pervading the practice of leadership and organizing, in its local dimension. The tensions within and between the streams revealed here may contribute to such an endeavor.

Overall, addressing the complexity of ethically leading and managing in SSA opens interesting research avenues, namely by exploring the tensions raised by African and Western approaches; or those existing between African practice and global benchmarks. The three different research streams we discussed in this article express distinct paradigms and interpretive modes, foci, theoretical approaches and influences, cultural perspectives, and learning/change perspectives. Future research may depart from within and across stream tensions to produce research appreciative of the diversity of the world and the plurality of institutions.



## Conclusion

Very few theories of leadership started elsewhere and became popular in the West. One key example is the performance-maintenance leadership theory (Misumi & Peterson, 1985), which originated in Japan (when this country was far away from the economic development level later reached, one should note) and subsequently became popular in the U.S. Others include the “back-translated” rediscovery of TQM in the U.S. after its development in Japan, and India’s *jugaad* (Cappelli, Singh, Singh & Useem, 2010). Effective management and impressive leadership exist and have existed in Africa, with Nelson Mandela providing a most telling example of virtuous leadership (Rego *et al.*, 2012). However, we know little about African conceptions of leadership and their associated ideas (such as *izenzele*, *iketsetse*, and *itirele*, identified by one of our anonymous reviewers, unknown outside their contexts) and it seems that as we strive to learn more about the two concepts of ethics and leadership, there are many missed opportunities. As scholars search for effective ethical leadership models, they have neglected or privileged certain parts of the world over others. This is important as parts of the world, globally, including the most economically developed, contain segments of resource deprivation that can learn from non-Western good practice. The example of the Aravind Eye Clinic, in India, is globally illuminating (Mehta & Shenoy, 2011).

In spite of so-called global management practices, history and geography have rules and times of their own (Marshall, 2105). In order to obtain more textured theories, several scholars focused on different perspectives and have provided many different reviews that have explored the best ways to conduct cross-cultural or international research (i.e., House *et al.*, 1997; Peterson & Hunt, 1997; Smith & Peterson, 2002; House *et al.*, 2004). The *etic* and *emic* approaches are along the most discussed. An *etic* approach attempts to be culturally neutral. In this case, the scholar approaches a given topic and tries to address it by avoiding cultural influences. An *emic* approach refers to accounts, or academic analysis, shaped by the culture of the observer. In the case of ethical leadership in SSA, the Western theoretical focus is mainly *etic*, whereas the African theoretical focus is chiefly *emic*.

In this article we explored how theorists at the interface of organization, international management, ethics and leadership, responded to the need to

create knowledge on the African context. Considering that researchers have mostly ignored ethics in Africa (Parboteeah, Seriki & Hoegl, 2014), we reviewed the literature on leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on ethical leadership implications. From the literature we derived three main approaches to leadership: functional, cultural and critical. These streams are internally coherent and revelatory of different understandings of management in Africa. We conclude that most of the literature thus far has focused on a functional perspective, where Western theories are translated to the African context. However, two other streams have also emerged as potentially relevant for future research: cultural and critical. The cultural perspective focuses on work that has Africa as the focus of conceptual attention, while the critical challenges the current assumptions we make about Africa by adopting a post-colonial perspective.

From these streams, we derived a typology of interpretive modes for advancing research on ethical leadership in SSA. This is based on two axes at the core of the three research paradigms and renders four main interpretive modes or approaches to research: foundation; translation; re-creation; and integration. We posited that the last two quadrants are particularly promising in terms of research opportunities, namely in developing new management and (ethical) leadership theories from an African context to address African phenomena, eventually exporting it to investigate and solve problems in other geographies, including the West.

## Limitations

The paper is not exempt of limitations. First, we assumed the label “African” or “SSA” as more or less homogeneous which is obviously problematic given the diversity within our geographical context of interest. Second, a qualitative review was conducted and while we are confident about our three research streams, some articles do not fully match or illustrate one stream over another. Also, some articles may focus on two perspectives at the same time. We sought to illustrate the diversity of how research is conducted but also create a distinct picture of how they are viewed. Third, it is also important to highlight that the relationships between the streams may be complex and there are different nuances that we may have discounted. We are not only talking about different research paradigms but also theoretical and conceptual granularity. There is also perhaps a bias in the field of ethical leadership towards articles that focus



on more “Westernized” views; thus, the articles so far may reflect this bias, not the lack of knowledge or work about Africa, itself a conceptual label that needs to incorporate pluralistic understandings (Khan & Ackers, 2004), cultural variations within the continent.

### Contributions for theory

Little is known about how ethical leaders operate in the specific African context. This is the main contributing argument of our article: in order to understand and develop ethical leadership in Africa, we need to investigate how these concepts are played out and understood *in situ* as well as the tensions characterizing the process of conceptualization involving local and global theories. Rather than exporting theory, we have to extend the use of an *emic* approach, and then expand the mainstream ethical leadership literature with African contributions. In Table 4 we summarize each of the streams and explain how these contribute for the interpretative modes in our model.

Then, inspired by the example of scholars in management and leadership, who are paying attention to what we can learn from other areas of the world (i.e., India, with its lessons on how to serve the poor; e.g., Prahalad, 2012), we invite researchers on ethical leadership to conduct research from this more critical or cultural perspective (*re-creation*) and then to “translate” it

to the West (our *integration* quadrant). We believe relevant knowledge can be created, shared, and transformed into practice from future empirical research, which is grounded on the direct observation of, and engagement with local leadership practices. Through the “translation” of first hand insights, and practice embedded knowledge, Africa can help us learn more about management through improvisation and bricolage (Uzo & Mair, 2014), leading with a communitarian ethos, managing in resource deprived environments (Cunha *et al.*, 2014), and so on.

### Contributions for Practice

Practical implications to leaders and managers interested in Africa can be derived from this paper. First, leaders and managers can better appreciate the challenge and complexities of the environment in which they operate. Second, they can understand the limitations of the Western leadership and management lens for working and leading in Africa. Third, they may understand that their own assumptions or prejudices about Africa have emerged from a colonial past and how this created a difficult and biased representation of Africa. For those going to Africa, it is important to highlight that anticipating their challenges is not even half the battle; but, without this previous knowledge, they would most likely fail because of limited cultural intelligence.

<div>TABLE 4</div> <div>Comparison of research streams</div>			
	Functional	Cultural	Critical
Focus	Western superiority: Western management is superior to competing models	Africinity: Management models must be fitted to local circumstances. There is no such thing as global management.	Question: African management needs to overcome the logics of colonial thinking—including in the field of management and organization.
Theoretical influences	Mainstream management diffusion: i.e. transformational leadership, HRM, etc.	Local, constructivist approach	Post-colonial theorizing
Cultural perspectives	<i>Etic</i> : Hofstede; GLOBE; values; identities	<i>Emic</i> : <i>Ubuntu</i> ; African management models	<i>Emic</i> : Post-colonial models theorizing
Interpretative modes	<b>Translation:</b> management practice may work cross-culturally with some translation.	<b>Re-creation:</b> different geographies, histories and identities require specific theorizing	<b>Rejection:</b> post-colonial thinking asserts its ontological status by contrast with colonial thinking—that it rejects.

Leaders and managers can appreciate the need to be more open to an indigenous perspective—especially one that may work alongside their own personal leadership and management style. Several important management and leadership ideas that became the norm in the West were developed first in non-Western parts of the world. There is no reason to disbelieve that SSA may provide valuable management and leadership ideas, insights, and practices to improve the realm of ethical leadership in other parts of the world (Hicks and Waddock, 2016). An “ethics crisis” has been often mentioned as the cause, or at least a facilitator, of many business scandals that have unfolded in the developed world. We advocate here that a humble approach must be adopted by international management scholars and practitioners regarding what may be learned from SSA. The *Ubuntu* philosophy may be particularly helpful to inform the larger literature on ethical leadership and management, namely through considering the social-communitarian component of business (Hicks and Waddock, 2016; Mangaliso, 2001). This component is often lost in Western leadership theories and practices, although scholars and practitioners alike have advocated that community principles must be adopted in organizations, with positive consequences for both the organizational and the employees’ health and well-being (Goler *et al.*, 2018; Mintzberg, 2014; Pfeffer, 2010, 2018).

Such an *ethics* may also be highly valuable for organizations that are able to serve and satisfy the needs of billions of customers who represent the “bottom of pyramid” and live both in developing countries and developed ones (London & Hart, 2004; London *et al.*, 2010; Maak & Pless, 2009; Yunus *et al.*, 2015). It is untenable that many Western companies espouse corporate social responsibility and sustainability values, yet prevent many from the benefits of businesses success and economic development (note, for example, how many Silicon Valley employees are homeless; Robinson, 2017; Weise, 2018).

From the discovery of diverse expressions of paradox in Angola (Cunha *et al.*, 2019) to the mastery with bricolage in Nigeria (Uzo & Mair, 2014), there are many lessons to be learned by the international management discipline from a close look at management in Africa. This article can be seen as a call for an appreciation of management as an expression of human diversity in context.

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