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The Africa we want and the Africa we see: How scholarship from Africa stands to enrich global scholarship

Helena Barnard

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The Africa we want and the Africa we see: How scholarship from Africa stands to enrich global scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Q2 This paper grew out of a keynote I delivered at the Academy of International Business Africa chapter meeting in Ghana, 2019, and was further honed in the review process. I share how emotionally challenging I sometimes find it to be a scholar of Africa, and some insights I have gained over time about meeting that challenge. Our work is strengthened when we honestly document what we find, using both scientific principles and global scholarship to guide us. But our scholarship can also enrich research globally: Insights we gain from our extreme conditions, our greater opportunities to study some phenomena, e.g. faith in business, and finally because Africans sometimes simply see things differently, e.g. African understandings of how the workplace relates to personal circumstances. I offer examples of how we can deal with the data challenges in Africa. We need to explain more carefully our setting to help readers from other contexts understand ours. We do not always recognize or play to our data strengths, and sometimes need to innovate evidence. I conclude by reiterating the need to combine an honest documentation of what we see from our African vantage point with a deep knowledge of current global scholarship.

Q3

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1. The Challenge of being an African Scholar

It often happens to me that I experience a wide range of emotions when I work on a research project situated in wider Africa. I feel sad when I become aware of the many people who will never get the chance to realize their full human potential, and angry at the corrupt so-called leaders who steal and lie while others suffer. I feel frustrated at how little things have changed over decades – and hopeful when I see that positive changes do occur.

But the language of academia is reason, not emotion. Research needs to be characterized by rigor, clear evidence, strong lines of argumentation and detachment from personal feelings. I have often grappled with how to manage my emotions while I seek the clarity of communication that characterizes a strong academic contribution. How, in other words, can I make sure that my emotions do not become fumes that obscure my vision, but instead the fuel that drives my work?

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Over the period that I have been grappling with this issue, I have learnt one key lesson. To the extent that we theorize the Africa that we see, we help create the Africa that we want. This means that we need to theorize the Africa that causes us sadness, anger, frustration and hope. We need to theorize the dysfunction that – sadly – so often characterizes our context when it occurs. We should not sugar-coat what we see; we should describe it as fully and as honestly as we can.

This is true whether we are investigating positive outcomes – firm performance, employee commitment – as much as when we are investigating corruption, bankruptcies or bullying. It is easy to be honest when we are documenting success; it is a lot harder when we are looking at other things. Often when I listen to young scholars from Africa, or in fact, from developing countries generally, I can see that the sub-text of what they say is "I want to be proud of my country". I want to say to them: To the extent that we theorize the world that we see, we help create the world that we want.

Let's think about what research achieves. It allows us to identify the (relevant) elements that are driving a certain outcome. It allows us to understand the relationships among those elements, and between those elements and the outcome. In other words, it allows us to establish what mechanisms are driving certain outcomes. Once we understand mechanisms, we have levers. We can use those levers for change.

I talk as a scholar. Our task, as scholars, is to identify what are the mechanisms that result in certain outcomes. Other people – activists, governments, businesspeople – can use those mechanisms to effect change. This means that our motivation, as scholars, is to do good scholarship. I am not even going to go into the discussion about connecting research with practice. It is a valid discussion, but before it actually matters, we need to have solid research. In fact, if we have sloppy research, it is probably better to not connect to practice!

This does not mean that we do not need to deeply understand our context – on the contrary. But we know so little about business and management in Africa that to do good research, we simply cannot ignore the guidelines for solid scientific practice. A useful source is the editorial of Lewin et al. (2016) in the *Management and Organization Review*. One of the points that they make is that even quantitative research can be exploratory rather than theory-testing, and in Africa, that is probably frequently the case.

For example, a colleague of mine at GIBS, Mandla Adonisi, used a well-established scale for a comparative study of corporate entrepreneurship in South Africa and Nigeria. One would imagine this to be a fairly universal construct, but he found that the scale hardly functioned in Nigeria. At the time – he is now deceased – there was very little appetite or outlets for scholarship from Africa, so he just focused on the South African story (Barnard et al., 2017). But it is clear that to make sense of what he found would have required at the same time a quantitative and an exploratory approach.

Lewin et al. (2016) also point out that *all* research, whether exploratory or theory-testing, must be anchored in existing literature. We see further because we stand on the shoulders of others. As scholars of a context that is desperately behind in its understanding of how business and management in this part of the world work, we cannot afford to ignore the insights that were generated in other contexts.

Because scholarship is by its nature a global game, we need to know the global scholarly conversation. We need to know what is being done in developing countries in other regions like South East Asia and Latin America, and beyond there, what is happening in the global centers of economic power. But it is equally important to not have a one-side balance of intellectual trade.

2. The Potential of African Scholarship

We need to know the theories that have shaped management research. But as we try and make sense of our own world, as we strengthen our own research by engaging with scholars and scholarship from other parts of the world, we also make a contribution to global scholarship. Let me explain three ways in which this can happen.

2.1. Insight into Extreme Conditions

The first instance where African scholars are particularly well-positioned to make a contribution is when we examine the sometimes extreme conditions in Africa. We may be trying to understand how firms respond to an HIV/AIDS epidemic, or to extremely rapid urbanization, or to a large informal economy. If there were an Olympic challenge on those elements, there is no doubt that African countries would be medalists. But we are not the only places in the world with HIV/AIDS, urbanization or informal economies. So our extreme conditions allow us to get deeper insights into conditions that also happen elsewhere, although not in such an extreme form (Barnard et al., 2017).

Consider Zimbabwe that has suffered decades of political and economic turmoil. There are nonetheless firms in Zimbabwe that have survived that extreme turbulence. Some of them have not only survived; they are thriving. A company like SeedCo[1] in Zimbabwe, a multinational corporation with partnerships with leading agricultural firms worldwide, is doing cutting-edge research and is thriving economically. And we have no idea how some Zimbabwean firms have managed to survive hyperinflation, massive outward migration, an unemployment rate that is estimated at between 90 and 95%[2] and other such challenges.

My colleague, Amon Chizema, and I have been trying to understand how firms can survive and even grow in such a resource-constrained and even resource-constraining environment. It would be incredibly useful for firms from across Africa if we could explain the mechanisms that those deeply tested firms use to survive.

But reflect for a moment about the world in which we live. Whether we talk about innovation, FDI attractiveness or growth, we know that firms benefit if the world in which they operate is stable, well-governed and democratic (Agbloyor et al., 2016; Bailey, 2018; Barasa et al., 2017). Developing countries have long been struggling to achieve such stability – and to run profitable businesses under those unstable conditions. But in today's world, it is not only developing countries that struggle with turbulence. The UK with Brexit and the US with the unpredictable actions of President Trump are also increasingly turbulent places.

Few will doubt that when we have figured out how those Zimbabwean firms survive and grow under very turbulent and challenging conditions, we will have contributed to African scholarship. We will be able to teach African managers about the levers they need to use when the going really gets tough. At the same time, given the growing global turbulence, such a contribution will also strengthen scholarship globally – provided, of course – that we have used appropriate theoretical lenses and rigorous methodological approaches.

Our conditions are extreme, but they are not unique. Because they are so extreme, they help us see more clearly what exactly is going on. But because they are not unique, our insights can be of value for scholars from across the world.

2.2. Different Freedoms and Opportunities

The second instance where we can make a particularly meaningful contribution to global scholarship is where our African vantage point gives us greater opportunity to explore an issue. Again, let me be concrete.

In Africa, people believe in God (Pew Research Center, 2017). It is in the nature of faith that it affects all parts of the believer's life, and it is no surprise that faith also shapes how business is conducted. Indeed, various recent studies show how business in Africa is shaped by people's faith (Namatovu et al., 2018; Swindell, 2019). We need to do a lot more work to understand the role of faith in business. Already, findings in a White Paper at GIBS, co-authored by myself and Anastacia Mamabolo (2019), suggest that faith fulfills at least three functions.

At the individual level, faith is a source of psychological capital. If human capital can be explained as the benefits to be gained from "what you know" and social capital as the benefits from "who you know", psychological capital can be explained as the benefits accruing from "who you are" (Luthans et al., 2007). For many managers, their faith is an important and empowering part of who they are. It is an important research question to try and understand how this dimension of psychological capital affects their decision-making processes and attitudes. For example, a person of faith may be better able to cope with adversity than one who lacks faith.

The second important function of faith in the workplace is to shape leadership, and specifically to inspire people to be servant leaders (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This means that leaders often use their faith to guide them to be humble and empathetic when engaging with their employees. The existing management literature often speaks about the high power distance in African countries (Wanasika et al., 2011). That is of course valid, but it is not the whole story. When leaders are people of faith, whether they are Muslims who see themselves as the shepherd of a flock, or Christians who look to the sacrifice of Jesus, they value humility. This suggests that faith may reduce power distance between a leader and followers.

Finally, faith is often an important informal institution (North, 1990) in African countries. Where laws are weak, and bribery and corruption abound, faith becomes an important compass. Faith fulfills the functions that formal institutions may play in other contexts: It provides a shared understanding of appropriate behavior; it incentivizes positive behavior, and it discourages opportunistic behavior. It therefore creates a greater sense of certainty within which business can operate.

We live in a multi-religious world, and faith can also be a source of division. When we gathered data, many managers explained God to us in quite inclusive terms: faith seemed to be the conviction that a higher being was guiding their actions, with the assurance that there was reason to how the future would unfold. Managers explained their relationship to the higher being, God, and not in terms of religion or denomination. Although they were personally very committed to their own religion, they also acknowledged that other religions existed.

However, management does not happen at a philosophical level. Managers must develop strategies to effectively lead a multi-religious workplace. We saw various strategies that managers used to manage in multi-religious workplaces. Some had prayer meetings at work, but did not require people of other faiths to attend. Others felt that it was important to keep one's faith private – to pray in one's office before a meeting, rather than in the meeting.

We do not know which of these strategies work the best, and under which circumstances. Collective prayer seems to be incredibly motivating for those participating – do the gains outweigh the costs when employees do not feel a part of that process? Much more scholarly work is needed before we will be able to explain the role of faith in business and management. But our perspectives are potentially of great value to global scholarship.

It goes without saying that Africans are not the only religious people in the world. When I recently attended a conference in Texas in the USA, it struck me how many faculty members were outspoken people of faith. But in the USA, there is a long tradition of separating state and church, and the view that faith should not affect governance seems to extend to the business world. This means that it is hard to do research there on people's religious beliefs and how they shape business and management.

The concept used in the Western management literature is "workplace spirituality", and that definition very frequently excludes the religious dimension, focusing instead on intrinsic and existential views of spirituality in the workplace (Houghton et al., 2016). In other words, scholars want to study beliefs and how they shape the world of work, but they often leave God out of that concept.

Why do they create such a watered-down concept? They work in a tradition in which matters of beliefs are rarely brought into the workplace. Perhaps they are scared about religious zealotry, proselytizing and divisiveness. Those are valid concerns, but let me repeat something I previously stated: The language of academia is reason, not emotion. The way to understand how faith works in the workplace, and optimally works in the workplace, is by studying what we see, even when we fear what we may find. That is always hard. But studying faith and business is much harder for a scholar from Texas than for an African scholar.

If a scholar wants to study digital multinationals, then Silicon Valley is probably the best place to be. But if a scholar wants to understand faith in business, it is better to be in Africa than in the USA. That is true not only of faith, but of many other issues. In those cases, our African vantage point gives us greater opportunity to explore an issue. It is our task and our opportunity as scholars of Africa to find such cases and explore the extent to which they can help improve our understanding of how firms operate.

2.3. A Different Way of Seeing the World

The third case where our position as African scholars provides us with a unique entry point into the global scholarly conversation is where our position allows us to simply see things differently.

In the Western world, there is a very clear distinction between what happens at work, and what happens in people's personal lives. Managers are expected to manage employees so that they are productive at work, but what happens at home is not really a concern in the Western management literature. In Africa, such a view is an uncomfortable one.

As Africans, we live in a challenging society, and we regularly see hardship. We know of people who have been defeated by the many obstacles in their lives, and people who have overcome them in inspirational ways. Good managers in Africa tend to know who has to get up at 3 am to get to work on time, who is supporting an extended family on the income of a cleaner, and who is studying every free moment to get out of poverty.

Q5 That challenging societal context affects the workplace. Motsei and Nkomo (2016) found that workplace bullying has its roots in the stresses of wider society. In a study that is being conducted by Anastacia Mamabolo, Willie Chinyamurundi and Chris Osakwe, many of Africans' "work" stressors (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009) prove not to come from the workplace at all. Stress manifests in the workplace, but employees are stressed because they lack reliable transportation to get to work, or because they worry about their obligations towards an extended family, or because they may have to incur debts to pay for expenses that they do not control. Good managers notice those struggles, and they try their best to manage them – because the productivity of the firm depends on it.

Why would a scholarly reader from the USA or Europe care? Well, the nature of work is changing (Barley et al., 2017). The very idea of an "employee" will need to be rethought, and with it, what a manager should care about. Nobody knows what the world of work will look like in a hundred years. But as Africans, we bring a very different perspective of what the world of work *could* look like. That perspective is potentially enriching.

I have mentioned three ways in which scholarship from Africa can enrich research globally. First, where we use the extreme conditions in our context to better theorize something that is present elsewhere, but in a less extreme form. Second, when we have greater freedom and access to explore an issue, and finally, when the ways we do things here allow us to offer an alternative vision.

3. Anchoring our Insights Empirically

One of the challenges of doing research on Africa relates to data poverty. Finding convincing data is a perennial challenge for all researchers, but scholars of Africa face a particular challenge. Scholars are custodians of knowledge, and when they come across phenomena or explanations that differ substantially from what has been previously found, it is their duty to interrogate the work. The first place where a critical reader will look is at the quality of the evidence. Thus, scholars who want to theorize what is novel about Africa must have robust evidence for their insights. If their data are weak, how is a critical reader to know that their insights are valid?

Because so many African countries are poor and underdeveloped, and much of the economy is informal, it can be hard to find evidence that is sufficiently rigorous to meet the quality standards of the global scholarly community. Dealing with that challenge requires a range of actions.

3.1. Explaining the Setting

We need to start by simply describing to an audience that is not familiar with Africa what our world looks like. For example, just about every African scholar can describe a typical

American fast food outlet. Because of movies and television, we have a very good idea of where Americans go and what they do when they need to grab a quick bite to eat. But how many Americans can describe its equivalent in Africa? And if that is true of something as simple and ubiquitous as fast food, it is that much more true when we speak about banking or work arrangements or how a poor person judges the quality of a purchase.

One way to help readers from the rest of the world understand the context is simply by explaining the setting. For example, the characteristics of an informal settlement outside a major African city and the types of business found there are important to help readers understand a reinterpretation of “entrepreneurial bricolage” (Baker & Nelson, 2005), i.e. the creation of something from nothing. Or if research is set in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, readers may need to be told that the three countries used to be governed as a federation so that they can follow the rationale for selecting those three particular countries as a research setting. Finally, explaining more about a region, for example education and employment levels, main industries, social challenges and so on, can help readers better understand a paper about the corporate social responsibility efforts of a major employer.

A second strategy is to include data of which the purpose is not analysis, but description. For quantitative studies, such descriptive, supplementary evidence will often be qualitative, and vice versa for qualitative studies. For example, because African economies are small, a qualitative study with responses from two-thirds of the role-players in an industry may have only eighteen respondents. Descriptive statistics about the size and national importance of that industry can help readers understand the value of the qualitative evidence. Similarly, the rationale for variables in a quantitative study may be better understood if a paper quotes comments by managers that show how the managers think about those issues.

Because we are trying to share our world with an audience that may well not be familiar with it, it is our job to explain specifics about the world in a fair amount of detail. My experience has been that readers cannot even begin to understand our theorizing if they do not understand what it is that we are trying to theorize. It is essential to give an explanation of the context. But we need to be very careful here.

A typical manuscript is no more than 40 double-spaced pages long. African scholars do not get an extra allowance of pages because they need to explain context! We need to be focused. We need to include only the background that is essential to understand the theory – and we need to make a very focused theoretical contribution. All expert scholars will say that “less is more”, and that one only gains by focusing one’s argument. For African scholars – for anyone trying to theorize an under-documented phenomenon – that is even more true.

3.2. Working to our Strengths

It is perhaps a lingering consequence of colonialism that we as Africans sometimes fall into the trap of disregarding the data to which we have easy access. We would travel past informal settlements, sprawling transportation hubs and informal traders without thinking of these as teeming with potentially fascinating data, even when we pour over studies of the purchase decisions of consumers in wealthy societies. We would interview only people who speak English, because we are not sure what the local equivalents of subject terms would be. We would make a distinction between "business and management" and cultural practices like weddings, church services and funerals.

Scholarship will be enriched if we could recognize and work to counter those biases. Once the scholar Nathaniel Boso returned to Ghana from the UK, he recognized the economic importance of funerals. When Gradus Kizito Wandera completed his PhD at GIBS, he discovered that Swahili speakers were mystified by the use of "commitment" to talk about organizational change. Surely that concept only applied to relationships with a sense of divine obligation, a profound duty of care? By taking seriously what we can learn from data-rich settings in Africa, we can often interrogate some deeply-held assumptions in the literature.

As Africans, we have the privilege of a deep knowledge of and often close proximity to what we are trying to theorize. This can be a strength, provided we understand that we need to actively work to identify and develop the data we need to advance our arguments.

3.3. Innovating Evidence

Before the businessman Hamilton Ratshefola (now Country General Manager for IBM South Africa) first visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he knew that most people in this very poor country lived on less than US$1 a day. But the extensive economic activity in the markets in Kinshasa convinced him that he needed to look beyond official numbers to understand the economy potential of the country. He ended up using the reported earnings of mobile operators to estimate disposable income.

How is this relevant for scholars? Scholarship advances not only because scholars develop new theories, but also because they develop new forms of evidence. This can apply not only to analytic techniques like statistics, but also to data. For example, although the analysis of patent data is today a staple of innovation research in advanced economies, the measure was developed over time through the efforts of pioneers like Schmookler (1954) and Pavitt (1985). As African scholars, the data poverty we face challenges us to think innovatively about the data we need.

In some cases, we can look to the past. Colonial records and the records of multinational corporations can be useful. The disadvantage of all archival data is that records were not kept for the purposes of a given contemporary research problem. In the case of Africa, we may need to be especially careful. Those records were often developed with problematic assumptions about Africans and African economies. But they do provide evidence that we can use in our work.

Another approach is to appropriate existing sources of evidence for new purposes. For example, some work has already been done on flight connections in Africa (Nonkenge & Luiz, 2018). The number and frequency of non-stop flights between African cities and beyond are probably a good proxy for trade flows, and can be profitably interpreted to examine continental integration and regional leadership. Similarly, looking at visa regulations – for example which countries offer visa-free entry and which not, whether special dispensations exist for students or businesses, and whether arrangements are reciprocal or not – can provide an integrative view of the continent that would be difficult to achieve in other ways.

Another emerging source of data that is increasingly used in management research is digital trace data (Howison et al., 2011). Because more and more activity happens online, the digital traces of not only forums that exist to facilitate the sharing of information and views (Twitter, WhatsApp, GitHub and others), but also digital evidence of routine business activities like remittance payments and subscriber lists provide potentially valuable sources of data. This is the case for underdeveloped contexts like Africa as much as elsewhere (see for example Lehdonvirta et al., 2019). As more tools become available to analyze such "big data", scholars of Africa should increasingly be able to sidestep the logistical challenges of gathering data on the continent.

4. Connecting with the Global Scholarly Conversation

To contribute to the global scholarly conversation, we need to trust what we see. We need to look carefully, and we need to make sure that our methodologies are robust enough to convince even the most sceptical scholar from another part of the world. Having done that, we need to trust our findings. Our opportunity is to theorize something that people in other places may fail to see – but to take advantage of that opportunity, *we* need to see it.

However, there is a real risk to scholarly advancement if we theorize what has not been previously documented, using evidence in ways that have not been done before, and we still want to make a contribution to scholarship. Knowledge builds on prior knowledge – what are we building on?

Thus, another necessary element is for us to be immersed in the global scholarly conversation. I need to know what scholars are saying about my area of interest. (This also implies that I need to have *an* area of interest. Too many of us hamstring our own development by trying to keep up to date with multiple literatures.) We strengthen our scholarship to the extent that we decide on a specific area of interest, and make sure to follow the literature in that specific area.

Being immersed in the global scholarly conversation implies that we really know the literature. We know who the early scholars were, and those who subsequently developed their ideas. We know where the field splits, and the reasons behind it. We know what the latest developments in the field are, and by whom they are being led. This means we know who are the current big names, but also the emerging scholars who are reshaping the field. It obviously means that we need to read a lot – even when it means emailing the author of a work and asking for a copy of a paper that we cannot find in the databases of our own institution.

Finally, we need to connect our world – what we see – with what is being done in the global scholarly conversation. My advice is to work with well-developed theories as far as possible. This means that we need to connect what we see with theories that mostly have been developed in very different parts of the world. Just finding the right theory to engage with can be tough. But if we use a hardly-tested theory to explain a new phenomenon, there is simply too much that is unfamiliar for a reviewer to even begin to assess the quality of what we have done. It can happen that the theory does not quite fit, and that the paper will need to extend that theory (Barnard et al., 2017). But when we document such boundary conditions, we also make a contribution to scholarship globally.

It is important to remember that it is the job of scholars to be sceptical. They have nothing against African scholars or African scholarship. On the contrary, I often hear editors express frustration that the African story is not being told. But reviewers and readers will be failing their duty if they do not interrogate our work. They have to insist on quality. They have to situate what we are doing within the larger body of scholarship, and see how it talks to that body of work. We therefore need to make sure that our work is focused, that our methodological choices are well-founded and robust, and that our mastery of extant literature is evident.

5. Conclusion

So often, the scholarship from privileged parts of the world feels to me like creations of spun sugar. Theories connect with theories in beautiful ways, but the work does not feel nourishing. Where we are situated, we have real problems and wonderful opportunities to break new ground as scholars. Our task is therefore to document, as precisely and rigorously as we can, the Africa that we see.

Africa is a continent with many opportunities. Explaining what we see can help us understand the mechanisms for change. It can also enrich scholarship from other parts of the world – in the same way that our scholarship builds on work from elsewhere. Our task is therefore a dual one. We need to know the scholarship that originated in other parts of the world, but we also need to trust what we see in our part of the world. To the extent that we theorize the Africa that we see, we help create the Africa that we want.

Notes

1. http://www.seedcogroup.com/, accessed July 3, 2019.
2. https://africacheck.org/reports/is-zimbabwes-unemployment-rate-4-60-or-95-why-the-data-is-unreliable/, accessed December 12, 2018.

Disclosure statement

Q6 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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