A TALE FROM THE FIELD: REFLEXIVITY DURING MANAGEMENT RESEARCH IN AN AFRICAN BASED DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION.

This article is a product of the reflexive experience of data collection and analysis in a development organisation within Uganda. A number of studies provide helpful debates about managing people in Africa. However, existent literature seldom covers pertinent issues related to collecting and analysing ethnographic data reflexively in African based organisations. And yet, critical self-scrutiny and reflexivity to account for the researcher's identity in the research processes is vital for the quality of the findings. The key research questions for this paper are: how does the identity of an African researcher who has been trained on 'Western' management theories, worked in an organisation in Africa, and then been educated within a 'Western' setting affect the character of data generated? And does such a researcher fully become 'one of them', or effectively remain an independent researcher? This paper discusses the process and results of the reflexive process through which answers to these questions were explored.

Key words: Reflexivity; Management research; African based organisations.

INTRODUCTION

Although there is a great emphasis and call for high-impact research and scholarship on the management of organisations in Africa (for example Horwitz, and Budhwar, 2015 and Beugre, 2015), less attention is given to the methodological implications of conducting research in the African context. Conducting field work in the global south (which includes Africa) is a daunting choice for researchers, and not only for those from advanced economies but also for those from Africa. Attempts to discuss African identity, specifically, have been considered daunting and potentially frustrating (Wright, 2002 p.1).

Some studies (for example Lunn, 2014 and Benatar, 2001) provide information on the various intercultural and ethical aspects as well as the technical dilemmas involved in doing research in less developed countries. However, a gap in literature exists about the field roles of qualitative researchers and how these affect the quality of data collected and knowledge generated about management in Africa. The primary aim of this paper is to explain how reflexivity was employed while conducting management research in Africa. The key

research questions for this paper are: how does the identity of an African researcher who has been trained on 'Western' management theories, worked in an organisation in Africa, and then been educated within a 'Western' setting affect the character of data generated? And does such a researcher fully become 'one of them', or effectively remain an independent researcher?

The term 'Western' management is used in this paper to refer to the widely dispersed management theories and techniques that have been designed based on experience and research carried out in the Anglo-American countries sometimes designated as liberal market economies of the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the United States of America (USA). Although 'the West' is often used generically to refer to developed countries, research on the varieties of capitalism has shown that these countries (even within Europe) vary in terms of culture and economic systems (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Amable, 2003). Sometimes, within the literature on management in Africa, there is reference to the 'West' and this differentiation seems to be made by default rather than explicitly.

A combination of ethnography and grounded theory was adopted in the study from which this paper was developed. Intensified field work studies have been recommended for a better understanding of management in Africa concerns and in order to find solutions that are more in sympathy with African conditions and aspirations (Edoho, 2001; Zoogah, 2008). Consequently, qualitative studies may be most suited for enhancing research rigour and contextualised knowledge generation on management in Africa (Zoogah, 2008).

The paper progresses as follows. First, there is discussion of ethnography and reflexivity. Then, the research methodology and research methods are outlined. This is followed by an explanation of how reflexivity was employed within the research, in terms of data collection and analysis. The next two sections outline, in turn, how reflexivity aided the interpretation of 'Western' theories and African practices, and how reflexivity incorporated consideration of the views of 'others', and their perceptions of whether the research was informed by 'African' values or contaminated by 'the West'. Finally, brief conclusions are provided which include suggestions for how the findings of this paper might inform future research in Africa.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND REFLEXIVITY

Ethnography can usefully be conducted while employing many of the tenets of grounded theory. Moreover, reflexivity is arguably complementary to this approach.

Ethnography and grounded theory

According to Gill and Johnson (2010), qualitative studies can be enabled by conducting an ethnographic study which involves the use of methods that capture social meanings from everyday practices of people in a given cultural or social context. Ethnography can be defined as:

> "the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting…..in order to collect data in a systematic manner…." (Brewer, 2000).

One of the elements of ethnography indicated in Brewer's definition above is that of direct participation of the researcher in the natural setting. This calls for attention on the insider and outsider roles of the researcher. However, unlike data collected from contrived experimental settings, ethnography provides the means to explore a phenomenon as it occurs naturally. This style of research is then assumed to facilitate exploring the social meaning of the phenomenon under study in its naturalistic conditions without tampering with the environment through experimental manipulations (Van Maanen, 1988). An ethnographic approach may facilitate a better understanding of what Nkomo, (2011, p366) describes as the "uniqueness of African culture but also its value to the world." This is important since the concept of 'African culture' is sometimes misrepresented in even explicit Afrocentric descriptions of what happens in Africa (Nkomo, 2011).

Ethnographic data collection methods can usefully be combined with grounded theory guidelines for data analysis. Earlier ideas on how to do qualitative research using grounded theory are given by Glaser and Strauss (1967) who were the first to suggest developing theory grounded in data rather than considering existing theories at the start of a research project. The assumption was that there is an objective social reality which the researcher can study as a neutral observer (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In contrast to earlier explanations of grounded theory, it has also been suggested that grounded theory might involve simultaneous data collection and analysis, as well as development of theory through inductive analysis of data while relating empirical impressions to theoretical arguments in literature (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). Thus, empirical material might 'speak for itself', and the findings of the research may emerge from the data as themes in the form of categories that are developed in the analysis process. Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) argue that engaging with data in such a manner increases rigour and facilitates movement of the inquiry from mere description of the social reality to developing explanatory theoretical frameworks of the concepts being studied. A reflexive account of this process demonstrates the researcher's role in interpreting data and emerging concepts.

Although Strauss maintained aspects of what might be regarded as his original stance, e.g. the emphasis of the researcher acting as a passive observer in the research process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), he has since subscribed to the idea of using sensitising concepts from the relevant literature as pointers in the initial data collection stage of the research process. More recent debates on grounded theory, in trying to move away from the almost positivistic assumptions in both Glaser's and Strauss and Corbin's versions, have emphasised what researchers and participants bring to the social reality being researched, (for example, the researcher's position, privileges, perspective and interactions) and what they do with these. Charmaz's (2003; 2008; 2014) constructivist approach, for example advocates the acknowledgement and engagement of participants' subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data. Thus, the process of theory construction, it is suggested, should beside having researchers reflexively interrogating their own impact, also involve them in attempting to sensitise participants to how their inter-subjective understandings of a social reality affect the development of alternative understandings of reality (Charmaz, 2008). The researcher is then expected to provide reflexive accounts of co-authorship of the research findings on the social phenomenon, reflecting the voices of both the researcher and the researched. This has been described as a socially constructed inter-subjectivity produced through researcher-researched interaction or social constructionist criteriological commitment (Cunliffe, 2010).

Reflexivity

There appears to be general agreement in the literature that the identity of qualitative researchers, and their involvement in the research, influences the process of data collection,

analysis and consequently knowledge generation. Most authors on the subject of qualitative research (including Mason, 2002; Bryman and Bell, 2003; and Cassel and Simon, 2004) agree that generating and analysing data qualitatively should involve critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, and being mindful of their actions and field role in the research process. The qualitative researcher thus needs to account for their being in the midst of a social phenomenon that they are investigating, showing, as it were, the hand of the researcher in the whole process. This critical self-scrutiny by the researcher is what is termed as reflexivity. The practice has been given multiple names by various authors including "methodological self-consciousness" or "narratives of the self" (Finlay, 2002 p.1), "confessional tale" (Van Maanen, 1988 p.73), and "self-analysis" (Patton, 2002 p.27). They all, however, suggest that reflexivity, in whichever way it is termed, is a defining feature of qualitative research because of the intersubjective elements that are likely to impact collection and analysis of qualitative data. Some argue that qualitative researchers are able to take on different kinds or modes of reflexivity depending on their philosophical assumptions (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Sceptical positivists, note Johnson and Duberley (2003), are likely to engage in 'methodological reflexivity' to take care of issues of validity and reliability of their chosen methodology while those involved in participatory and explanatory research engage in 'epistemic reflexivity' which involves being aware of the researcher's social location.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) also emphasise the importance of reflexivity, arguing that it facilitates the process of thinking through what was done, how it was done, consequences of a particular unforeseen research issue, and the effect of issues such as these on the quality of data generated and information obtained from analysis during the research process. Therefore, researchers should, argue Denzin and Lincoln (2011), take care to show something of the process and context of the activities they use to study a phenomenon. Various suggestions therefore are available on how researchers should reflexively evaluate ways in which intersubjective components of their research process (including social relationships, everyday life, discipline, language, cultural values etc.) impact on the planning, execution, analysis and reporting of their projects.

The labels and approaches to reflexivity above generally suggest that being reflexive involves taking care of the impact of: (1) the social context on the social phenomenon studied and (2) who the researcher is (their background, experience, beliefs or values) on the research process to enhance the trustworthiness, transparency and accountability of research results and claims (Finlay, 2002). In essence, consideration is given to the impact of ethnographers and their field roles on the social context and phenomena being studied. Researchers

therefore would engage in reflexivity in order to try and preserve naturalism through avoiding disruption of the setting through informants' reactivity to the ethnographer's presence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS EMPLOYED

The study on which this paper is based used a complementary research methodology and research methods.

Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was adapted to study "*employee performance management and control in an African based development organisation*", a study from which this paper was developed. The decision to undertake qualitative research was underpinned by the combination of a realist and interpretivist ontological perspective, with the assumption that behaviour is grounded in actors' interpretations of the social situation in which they are located (Gill and Johnson, 2010 p.155). It was also assumed that the participants' actions and behaviours existed independently, and the researcher could discover, understand, and describe those behaviours. As a result, it was important to gain access to the participants' day-to-day activities to understand how they were making meaning of the influences around them. Furthermore, it was assumed that an attempt could be made to minimise (not eliminate completely) the impact of the researcher's influence on the research process to reflexively discover knowledge about the actors' social realities (Seale, 1999). Thus, a neo-empiricist epistemological stance was taken assuming that knowledge about the participants' behaviour could be obtained by collecting and analysing data reflexively. An attempt could be made to minimise the dangers of reacting and ethnocentrism whilst maintaining a balance between insider and yet outsider roles.

Research methods

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were adopted as core techniques to obtain data that would facilitate description and explanation of employee behavioural responses to institutionalised formal models of employee performance management, taking account of informal processes and the social negotiation of control. This involved attempts to capture the dynamics of the practice (employee performance management and control) by

managers and the consequent employee behaviours in both the formal and informal organisational contexts. Research shows that "human action, unlike the behaviour of non-sentient objects in the natural world has an internal subjective logic" (Johnson *et al,* 2006 p.132). This approach was therefore taken because of the need to capture the respondents' inter-subjectivity from everyday practices in their naturally occurring settings. In this case, the setting was an African based organisation.

Interviews were also conducted to collect data. It is generally agreed that interviewing has, over the years, remained the most common method of generating qualitative data, even though a range of approaches are used in this method. Semi-structured interviewing is sometimes referred to as "qualitative"' interviewing (Mason, 2002 p.62), "exploratory", (Cassel and Symon, 2004 pp. 11-23) or "in-depth interviewing" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011 p.533). As Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.533) put it, "the heart of our social and personal being lies in the immediate contact with other humans" i.e. we express who we are through social interaction. The choice of this form of interviewing was thus intended to maximise immediate face-to-face contact for talking, interacting with people and if necessary clarifying questions and responses.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using sensitising concepts that were informed by a prior literature review of employee performance management and control of work processes. The use of sensitising concepts has been explained by Blumer (1954) who argued that the researcher's pre-understanding of theory can be used as a preliminary guide or 'directions in which to look' (Blumer, 1954 in Johnson and Duberley, 2015 p.5). Participants were, during the interview, encouraged as much as possible to express themselves in-depth, in terms of their experience and attitudes to the day-to-day practices that influenced their work behaviour.

Unlike telephone or skype interviews, face-to-face interviews involved a real social encounter which had an effect on the process of data collection (Mason, 2002) and this required reflexivity throughout the whole process. The ontological position of the study assumed that the participants' actions, interactions and views at work would provide meaningful properties of the process of employee performance management and control in an African based organisation. In other words, the workers' actions and behaviour depended on their interpretation of what was going on around them and the researcher could access this interpretation. It was also assumed that the actions, interactions and views of both managers and employees would be influenced by the African society and environmental context. Epistemologically, it was imagined that verbal responses might need to be confirmed by

observing actions, since people were likely to say one thing and yet do the other. It was on this basis that a decision was made to carry out participant observation. This method was aimed at collecting data that would facilitate a description and explanation of managers' prompts as well as participants' behavioural responses to, as Mason (2002) argues, derive meaning from ordinary activities.

REFLEXIVITY WHILE CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITHIN AN AFRICAN ORGANISATION

The preparation for data collection, data collection and data analysis themselves, were informed by grounded theory and undertaken using reflexivity. The experience of using the research approach discussed above revealed two aspects of the researcher's identity that were not considered as important at the start of the project, yet proved influential in data collection and analysis. These were the fact that the researcher had prior formal management education, and had lived out of Africa - in the 'West' - for a period of about 3 years. Below is a discussion of how these issues played out and proved to have important methodological implications for data collection and analysis.

Preparing for the field

It was assumed in the study that the day-to-day work behaviour of participants as well as their involvement in the informal social activities at and away from work would constitute meaning and knowledge for how employee performance management and control were implemented and responded to by employees at the case study organisation. Therefore, because the study was focused mainly on response to as well as implication of employee performance management practices in the African based organisation context, an ethnographic approach was considered a suitable methodology for understanding the context. The data for the study were considered to be potentially surrounded by secrecy and controversy and therefore difficult to gain access to by the researcher. Ethnography was thus considered to be a suitable research approach since it would facilitate flexibility and enable depth in accessing and interpreting the behaviour of individual participants. A period of four months was spent at the case study organisation in Uganda, during which time observation took place and interviews were conducted. However, the study did not involve application of

all of the ideas and principles that have been put forward to describe ethnography. The researcher was, for example, not a stranger stepping out into an alien community as anthropologists might describe ethnographers, because the case study organisation and participants were not completely alien. The researcher had prior experience of the organisation. The study instead exploited the active participation, involvement and interest in the life of the world studied aspect of ethnography in carrying out participant-observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Therefore, it was crucial to gain access to how managers and employees were making sense of what was going on around them and to consider the social influences that were impacting on their work behaviour (Gill and Johnson, 2010. p.155). The ethnographic approach that was used facilitated a closer access to the informal organisation and a deeper understanding of the participants' work behaviour and the social influences on actions.

A decision was made to use reflexivity in a way that could be described as in-between 'methodological reflexivity' and 'epistemic reflexivity' (see above for Johnson and Duberley's, 2003 description of these terms). In other words, although the study largely took an interpretivist approach, prior experience with the social context of the phenomenon studied meant that it was possible to consider strategies to reflexively work with the issues that were likely to crop up as a result of the chosen data collection methods. This also meant that the processes of data collection and analysis were flexible, allowing knowledge to emerge from the social context and events noted during the research process. The objective of collecting and analysing data reflexively was thus to minimise (and not to completely eliminate) and acknowledge the effect of my subjective influence on the data collected and the results of analysis. The following guidelines by Cassel and Simon (2004, p.20) were used for reflexive collection and analysis of data:

i. Putting presuppositions down in writing at the start of the study, and construct this list at each stage of the research process,

ii. Keeping a research diary in which own feelings about the process are recorded,

iii. Reflecting on the experience of involvement in the study.

However, as Patton (2002) argues, no amount of thoughtfulness can guarantee 100% readiness for all of the issues that the field throws at the researcher. I explain the presuppositions I put down at the start of the study in the next section, below. However, management training as well as study and life in a developed country were unforeseen influences on the data generation process and analysis. These issues appeared as a subtle

surprise. They were therefore not 'prepared for' prior to field work but emerged during the process and thus there was a need for conscious analysis, or what Johnson and Duberley (2003) call epistemic reflexivity.

Reflexivity during data collection

The researcher was African by descent, was born and raised in Africa, and was educated then worked for over 10 years in Uganda. At the time of data collection, the researcher had lived in the United Kingdom for 2 years and thus went to Africa and Uganda in particular, to carry out research not as an alien to the formal and informal social organisational processes but with the idea that I was going to the 'familiar'. Having lived and worked in Africa during most of the researcher's life was expected to be advantageous for her in trying to understand the participants' behaviour. The researcher also expected that her experience in Uganda would enable her to engage with the participants meaningfully as she had an understanding of the language they used and the culture they lived in. More specifically, she had previously worked for over five years in the case study organisation, first in a lower level position and later in a line manager position. She therefore personally knew a number of employees across the organisation and had an idea of the institutional mandate as well as the management culture. Although some changes had taken place at the organisation since she was last there, her previous involvement was expected to (positively and to some extent negatively) influence this research. On a positive note, she had good working relationships with top management, peers and the rest of the employees which enabled her to attain not only access to the organisation but also willing and open/sincere participation from the participants. Gaining access to a part of the reality where the phenomenon under study is present is considered to be a paramount determinant of the quality of a qualitative research project (Stenbacka, 2001). The researcher's pre-understanding of industry and/or the context of the case study is also believed to play a vital role in ensuring the quality of the results (Yin, 2009). However, researcher had preconceived ideas of what the strengths and loopholes could be in the employee performance management and control system and the general politics of the organisation. She anticipated that this previous experience might potentially influence the collection and interpretation of data as referred to below. She was from the start, through data collection and analysis aware of her field role. She needed to be reflexive about the impact of her prior experience in the case study organisation, how she engaged in participant

observation with former workmates and supervisors, as well as how she viewed Ugandan society and Africa generally.

Following Cassel and Simon (2004)'s advice to put presuppositions down in writing at the start of the study a list of expectations was developed regarding data collection and analysis before commencing field work, as outlined below.

i.   Since it was a common occurrence for employees in the organisation to engage in discussions about their misgivings on the reward system, most respondents would want to divert the interaction during the interview to air their views on issues to do with pay. It was alright for them to talk about pay but the researcher also wished to probe other aspects of employee performance management and control.

ii. The researcher had previously worked with some of the current project leaders. Their new staff may view her as their supervisor's 'old friend' and withhold some of the information relevant for this research for fear of the possibility of the researcher passing on what they would rather not have their supervisors know.

iii. Respondents doubling as the researcher's former colleagues may unconsciously withhold some of their views and information with an assumption that she was, from my previous experience, already aware of such information.

iv. Participants may view the researcher as some sort of 'top management's messenger' because the information sheet indicated that official permission to carry out this research had been obtained from the director of the organisation. Responses may therefore be given in a way that would be approved as messages to top management and/or they may withhold some of the information intended to be kept from top management.

v.   The researcher knew what responses to expect from some respondents. She had prior knowledge of some of the supervisors' management styles as well as the attitudes toward control of some of the employees and therefore she had an idea of what to expect from them.

It was thus expected from the start of this study that the researcher's prior work experience at the case study organisation would influence how participants would view her. However, she was aware of the need to be reflexive, and aimed to be aware of her prior knowledge of most of the participants in the interpretation of the findings. In conducting the fieldwork, the researcher found that some of the assumptions proved to be correct. There was a tendency, for example, of former workmates to state that they were sure that she knew 'these things'

and they seemed to think that they did not have to give further explanation. Therefore, in subsequent interviews interviewees were gently requested to clarify/a reminder about 'these things' to encourage further discussion. At other times, participants referred to the real names of personalities or partner organisations in an attempt to link personalities to what happened in practice. Statements such as "You know H (supervisor's name) does..." may have biased my interpretation of what went on. The participant seemed to take advantage of the researcher's prior knowledge of H to describe what was happening in their department. In such situations, the researcher tried to tactfully go back to using titles e.g. supervisor, scientist or international partner rather than the names of personalities or organisations. In that way, the researcher was able to distance herself, at least to some extent, from what the interviewee expected her to know.

Reflexivity during data analysis

The researcher was aware that her prior work experience with some of the respondents would influence her analysis of their responses. Prior knowledge, for example, of some managers' management styles as well as the attitudes to control of some employees was likely to bias interpretation of data obtained. Two strategies were devised to keep subjective judgement of such data to a minimum: (1) The researcher looked out for the voice of the 'familiar participant' in the interview, checking for what she expected from them and then, (2) She memo-ed the difference between what they said and what she expected them to say. she was also constantly checking and asking herself whether she was making up meaning of interview transcripts and field notes or allowing herself to find meaning. It was possible to imagine what information from an interview was 'meant to mean' rather listening for what 'it means'. Even though complete elimination of own subjectivity in the analysis of such data cannot be claimed, and arguably would not want to do this, the extent to which the researcher's prior experience with former employees influenced analysis of data was minimised by these efforts to be reflexive.

REFLEXIVITY: AIDING INTERPRETATION OF 'WESTERN' THEORIES AND 'AFRICAN' PRACTICES

Existent literature on management practice in Africa often highlights the incongruence of 'Western' theories of management with African culture (Harvey, 2002; Blunt and Jones,

1997; Jackson, 2002; Beugre and Offodile, 2001), and the need to question the universality of management techniques developed and rooted in the 'Western' world cultural values and norms. For example, authors such as Anyansi-Archibong (2001), Edoho (2001) and Nkomo (2011) expound on the challenges of implementing indigenous programmes in Africa with foreign management practices. Such challenges call for an application of indigenous knowledge systems and interpretations to develop a management philosophy based on African trends of thought and cultural influences (Mbembe, 2002; Edoho, 2001; Nkomo, 2011; Beugre and Offodile, 2001; Mangaliso, 2001). However, the 'Africanising' of management theories is a complex exercise (Edoho, 2001; Anyansi-Archibong, 2001; Dibben, Wood & Mellahi, 2013). Given the topic of the research study, I needed to reflect on the complexities of application of 'Western' management theories to management practice in Africa. This revealed a further complexity: knowledge generation was affected by 1) my 'Western' based managed training and 2) the views of attitudes of participants in an African based organisation who have neither been exposed to 'Western' based management training nor lived in the 'West' for a considerable amount of time. The way in which this played out in practice is illustrated below, through referring to the example of understandings of 'motivation'.

Motivation is a common topic in management textbooks, journal publications and lectures. I therefore had, during my undergraduate and postgraduate training in Africa, been provided with insights into motivational theories and effective management practices as well as how to achieve efficiency in controlling and directing employees' work behaviour. However, I did not realise that repeated exposure to these theories had over time turned me into a believer of some sort of 'universal timeless principles' of motivating employees. Moreover, research concluded that, for example, Herzberg's two-factor theory still had utility nearly 50 years after it had been developed (Bassett-Jones, 2005). I therefore unconsciously embarked on management research with presumptions that I was unconsciously unaware of. For example, Herzberg proposed that certain aspects of the job cause satisfaction and therefore motivation, while others cause dissatisfaction (Butler and Rose, 2011). Following this theory, I have over the years subscribed to the argument that factors such as responsibility, achievement, recognition and promotion are, without exception, job satisfiers and therefore motivators. Even though some process theories such as Vroom's expectancy theory have assumptions that may be culturally specific, Herzberg's job satisfiers appeared to be those that would be applicable even in Uganda.

In an attempt to understand what the managers were valuing and rewarding, I asked participants about the rewards that they were accruing from their work. When interviewing participants, it was evidently obvious that most of the respondents were not enthusiastic about the rewards obtained from their work and thus rewards may not have been involved in positively directing work behaviour. This was not surprising to me as most of the participants had identified only pay (a hygiene factor and not a motivator) as the reward they accrued from their work. However, I then felt prompted to find out what motivated employees to work 'hard'. Most line managers in the organisation indicated that they expected intrinsic factors to motivate their employees. However, unemployment levels in Uganda, relations with colleagues (a factor that Herzberg had identified as a hygiene factor and not a motivator) and contribution to society's wellbeing dominated employees' responses as to why they worked 'hard'. This can be illustrated by considering the following interviewee responses.

"*Oh I have never thought about that. But these guys are my colleagues here, why would I not make their life and work as easy as much as I can? And unlike many people who have no jobs, I earn a living in the process of doing just that. I think it is courtesy to your workmates and the institution to be a diligent worker.*" (Technician 3)

Technician 3 thus worked hard partly because this was one way of being considerate to workmates and the organisation. Another interviewee explained that,

"*I think our work is very encouraging because we have direct contact with farmers. It's great to see our work directly benefiting farmers and they tell us about the difference our work has made in their lives. This is a great motivator……….. The farmers, our clients, they usually come back with feedback and we get to know how much they appreciate our work. It's a nice feeling to know that your work is valued.*" (Research assistant 6)

An awareness of the contribution that employees made to a wider society also seemed to be a motivator. A further interviewee advised,

"I think it would be silly not to take your work serious whatever difficulties you may face because there is no bigger problem than losing it. …..getting another one is a nightmare. Every wise person here is careful about their job" (Research assistant 4).

These responses were different to those that I had expected, given my formal management training and experience with motivation theories. It was through reflexivity about my identity that I was able to appreciate that the views of the participants were different from my expectations.

Although I was aware of challenges to my prior thinking during interviews I endeavoured to resist the temptation to ask leading questions. This was in anticipation that the 'right' answers would come up in subsequent interviews. The same information, however, emerged from the process of inductive coding of the data later on during analysis. Reflexivity thus went beyond data generation into analysis, and the more I looked at interviews and extracted information from them inductively, the more I increased the chances of allowing it speak for itself without being 'contaminated' by who I was as a researcher.

REFLEXIVITY AND THE VIEWS OF 'OTHERS': AFRICAN VALUES OR 'CONTAMINATED' BY THE WEST?

Described above were the biases and preconceptions that influenced my expectation of certain responses to interview questions, in addition to the discoveries that were contrary to prior anticipation. Outlined below are the reflections on what the participants thought of me as a researcher.

While management training had influenced my expectation of specific responses from participants, the fact that I lived and studied in a developed country influenced some participants' view of my identity. There exist substantial and undeniable differences between African and 'Western' social, cultural and organisational behaviour (Adeleye, 2011). I noticed during this study that participants consciously checked on whether I still held 'African values' or had been 'contaminated' by experience in the 'West'.

This comment was, for example, specifically made when I asked supervisors about their attitudes toward the informal social activities engaged in by their employees at and away from work. Although research on Human Resource Management in Africa acknowledges that organisations in Africa are more of a social community, it has also been argued that managers in Africa may still hold in esteem 'Western' management concepts over African indigenous

management practices (see for example Gbadamosi, 2003; Budhwar and Debrah, 2001; Horwitz *et al*, 2002). It is argued that the micro systems of organisations in developing countries may actually be interested in replicating 'Western' theory and practice in their management rather than resisting it (Arthur, *et al.,* 1995). This has been termed as a crude idea that "West is best" (Kauda, 2010, p.10). I personally believed that, as far as managers were concerned, the formal guidelines, which generally conformed to 'Western' management styles, took precedence over the informal structures constructed by employees. In an attempt to confirm this assumption, supervisors were asked first if they were aware of the informal social activities their employees were engaged in. Supervisors were also asked if they thought that such social activities had any impact on employee work performance. Supervisors were aware of what employees engaged in and some mentioned that they approved of that sort of social engagement because it facilitated team spirit, aided supervision and boosted work morale. This can be illustrated by the quote below from Research Scientist 2.

> *"I do not know what I would do with a batch of technicians each minding their own business. They need to talk the same language, be free with each other, that's how we can together pull in the same direction. I have to worry if this doesn't happen because people here depend on each other a lot to complete the clients' jobs"*. (Research Scientist 2)

However, I soon noticed that asking whether there was any value in the informal social activities at work portrayed to the participants the possibility that I held foreign work values as a result of studying and living abroad. I was, for example, asked if I was "now like a *muzungu* (white person)" and had developed individualistic ideas. Here again is Research scientist 3's response to the question as to whether informal social activities among employees were valuable:

> *"Definitely, what is life supposed to be about if people cannot enjoy each other. Do not tell me you have started developing 'muzungu' ideas of individualism. I hear you do not even know your neighbour out there where you study. D has been telling us such stories from her experience in N* [N is pseudonym of a developed country].*"* (Research scientist 3)

Similarly, Research scientist 7 related:

"I spent 2 months at TUQ [TUQ is pseudonym of an institution in a developed country] *and was shocked at the way people live; they do not even know where their colleagues live. I honestly do not know how they manage life, though they seemed ok with their culture. They have converted you? Haven't they?"* (Research Scientist 7)

Following these responses, I noticed that I needed, in subsequent interviews and interactions, to be careful to avoid giving an impression or saying anything that would be linked to my exposure to the 'West'. I also, from there on, took care that I did not say or do anything that suggested that what is considered 'Western' is supreme to indigenous ideas and views. These views were allowed to flow naturally from the conversations and informal comments from the participants as the process of data collection went on. I also discovered that although the question was originally intended to analyse the value of the informal organisation, I was able to take note of the supervisors' as well as employees' attitudes towards cultural co-optation of what are considered as 'Western' values into an African based organisational setting. In summary, it appeared that values viewed as 'Western' were generally considered 'unnatural'. The latter assumption can be evidenced by an employee's response to how supervisors regarded the regular habit of the informal sharing of restricted work resources with co-workers on different projects:

"Ahhhhh! Even them (supervisors) *if they are in the lab and they find that we do not have pipettes for example, they will tell one of us to run to TC* [TC is a pseudonym of a work station] *people and see if they have and grab some. It is not a crime, even though it is officially wrong. You well know that life is different here from what happens in TAIC* [a pseudonym of an international controlled programme hosted by at the case study organisation`] *for example. There, they try to do their things like 'bazungu' but even there, I am telling you, they do not succeed being strict with things because you cannot work against your nature, can you?"* (Technician 3)

The process of reflexivity during this research was therefore not only helpful in revealing my own and others' preconceptions, but also facilitated the discovery of new insights into the carrying out of management research in an African based organisation.

CONCLUSION: CAN AN AFRICAN/WESTERN RESEARCHER CONDUCT RIGOROUS RESEARCH IN AFRICAN ORGANISATIONAL SETTING?

This paper reveals how reflexivity can enhance the conducting of research in African based organisations. The topic is important given the number of articles in African business and management journals that are co-authored by African researchers abroad (Zoogah, 2008), and given the growing impetus to encourage further work on African Management, evidenced, for example, by the growing reputation of this journal within the field of Business and Management. Moreover, the character of data generated may be affected by the researchers' identity and experience. Researchers who have lived in the 'West' for a considerable amount of time and/or attained 'Western' based management training should reflect on certain aspects of their identity while collecting qualitative data in Africa.

The process of reflexivity employed during this research led to the generation of new insights. The first key finding is that management researchers in Africa may find the quality of their data tainted by theoretical philosophies acquired from formal 'Western' management training. I discovered this when I unwittingly made assumptions about what motivates employees.

Management training and education in Uganda is largely based on a 'Western' based curriculum (Wiegratz, 2009). Generally, there are a high percentage of foreign management educators and consultants who are mostly responsible for the development of the management education training programs in Africa (Anyansi-Archibong, 2001 p.64). Even when the programs are developed by indigenous educators or trainers, they use texts and studies based on 'Western', industrialised cultures and assumptions (Anyansi-Archibong, 2001 p.64). Inclination to graduate training sometimes tend to get researchers familiar with what Zoogah, (2008 p.236) terms as "acontextual research" where context is disregarded. A review of 96 articles in the Journal of African Business published over a seven year period (2000-2006) revealed that articles demonstrated weak fit between the 'West' and Africa if there was indication that 'Western' theories had to be modified before applying them to the African context (Zoogah, 2008 p.227). This may be regarded as empirical evidence of the different contextual environments of Africa and the 'West.' Furthermore, a weak fit of modified theories may also indicate the complexity of the African context. Consequently, contextualisation of theory generation and management training in Africa may improve the research process. This discussion is not only important for management practice but also for reflexivity on part of scholars who study and research about management in Africa with pre-

conceived ideas obtained from 'Western' based formal management training and education. Management academics and students may need to try to avoid jeopardising the quality of data generated and analysed in organisational studies projects due to their pre-held assumptions acquired through management training and study. Jackson's (2002) research has previously pointed out the influence of exposure to foreign management education on the practice of managing organisations in Africa. However, this seems to be an issue not only for management practitioners but also for management researchers.

Secondly, participants' responses were influenced by their view of me (the researcher) and my experience of the 'Western' culture. Researchers who have lived in the 'West' for a considerable amount of time may, while carrying out ethnographic approaches in their home country, need to be aware of how their experience abroad may have influenced the way in which they carry out research and/ or the way in which the research participants perceive them. It may be concluded from my experience that participants in African based organisations may be suspicious of a researcher who has lived in a developed country and thus treat him/her as someone less than 'one of us'.

Another implication of these findings is that it is important to acknowledge (and engage) participants' subjectivity during knowledge generation, as Charmaz (2003) suggests, in African based organisations. This is so that participants are aware of how their inter-subjective understandings of a social reality may affect the findings (Charmaz, 2008). Scholars on management in Africa may need to adopt this approach to provide reflexive accounts of co-authorship that reflects the voices of both the researcher and the participants.

In summary, it is important to take a reflexive approach to research in Africa, even when the researcher was brought up and educated in that country. Reflexivity, in terms of my own self-awareness and consciousness of how research participants viewed me was beneficial to me as a researcher, and arguably led to more thoughtful data collection and analysis. Harvey's (2002, p.3) statement that "…*just as Wonderland held many surprises for Alice during her adventure, Africa holds many surprises for Western HRM.…*" may still hold true today for 'Western' world influenced management research projects in Africa, including those conducted by African researchers based in Africa, and those based abroad.

References

Alvesson, M. & Skoldberg, K. (2010). *Reflexive Methodology.* London: Sage publication Ltd.

Alvesson, M. & Sandberg, J. (2013). *Generating Research Questions Through Problemitisation.* London: Sage publication Ltd.

Amable, B. (2003). *The Diversity of Modern Capitalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, UK.

Anyansi-Archibong, C. B. (2001). 'Toward an African-oriented Management Theory', In F. M. Edoho (ed). *Management Challenges for Africa in the Twenty-First Century: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives.* 63-71. London. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Bassett-Jones, N. (2005). Does Herzberg's motivation theory have staying power? *Journal of Management Development,* 24(10): 929-43.

Benatar, S.R. (2001). Reflections and recommendations on research ethics in developing countries. *Social Science and Medicine,* 54 (2002): 1131–1141

Beugre, C. D. & Offodile, F. (2001). Managing for organisational effectiveness in Sub-Saharan Africa: A culture-fit model. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 12(4), 535-550.

Beugre, C. D. (2015). The challenge of management scholarship in Africa. *Africa Journal of Management Studies*, 1(1): 94-98.

Blunt, P. & Jones, M. L. (1997). Exploring the limits of Western leadership theory in East Asia and Africa. *Personnel Review*, 26(1/2), 6-23.

Brewer, J. D. (2000). *Ethnography.* Buckingham Open University press.

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2003). *Business Research Methods.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Budhwar, S. P., & Debrah, S. Y. (2001). *Human Resource Management in Developing Countries.* London: Routledge.

Butler, M. & Rose, E. (2011). *Introduction to Organisational Behaviour.* London. CIPD

Cassell, C. & Symon, G. (2004). *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research.* London: Sage publications Ltd.

Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry:* 249-291. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage publications.

Charmaz, K. (2008). Constructionism and the Grounded Theory method. In J. F. Holstein, & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of Constructionist Research*: 397-412. New York: The Guilford Press.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Second ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2011). Crafting qualitative research: Morgan and Smircich 30 years On. *Organisational Research Methods*, 14(4): 647-673.

Dibben, P., Wood, G. & Mellahi, K. (2013). Management Research on Africa: Existing debates and controversies and future directions. Manchester: *Third International Conference on Management in Africa*, 5-6 September 2013.

Denzin, K. N. & Lincoln, S. Y. (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research.* London: Sage publications Ltd.

Edoho, F. M. (2001). Management in Africa: The Quest for a Philosophical Framework', in F. M. Edoho (ed). *Management Challenges for Africa in the Twenty-First Century: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives*. 73-89. London. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2(2): 209-230.

Gbadamosi, G. (2003). HRM and the commitment rhetoric: Challenges for Africa. *Management Decision,* 41(3), 274-80.

Ghebregiorgis, F. & Karsten, L. (2006). Human resource management practices in Eritrea. *Employee Relations*: 28 (2) 144-163.

Gill, J. & Johnson, P. (2010). *Research Methods for Managers* (Fourth ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Hall, A.P. & Soskice, D. (2001).*Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, M. (2002). Human Resource Management in Africa: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 13(7): 1119-1145.

Horwitz, F. & Budhwar, P. (2015). *Handbook for Human Resource Management in Emerging Markets.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Horwitz, M. F., Kamoche, K. & Chew, K. I. (2002). Looking East: Diffusing high performance work practices in the southern Afro-Asian context. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 7(13): 1019-1042.

Jackson, T. (2002). Reframing Human Resource Management in Africa: A cross cultural perspective. *The international Journal of Human Resource Management,* 13(7): 998-1018.

.

Johnson, P. & Duberley, J. (2003). Reflexivity in management research. *Journal of Management Studies,* 40(5): 1279-1280.

Johnson, P. & Duberley, J. (2015). Inductive praxis and management research: Towards a reflexive framework. *British Journal of Management,* 26(4): 760–776.

Kauda, J. (2010). Culture and leadership in Africa: A conceptual model and research agenda. *Africa Journal of Economic and Management Studies,* 1(1): 9-24.Lunn, J. (2014). *Field Work in The Global South: Ethical Challenges and Dilemmas.* London: Routledge Taylor & Francis group.

Mbembe, A. (2002) 'African modes of Self-Writing,' translated by S. Rendall. *Public Culture*, 14 (1): 239-273

Mangaliso, P. M. (2001). Building competitive advantage from Ubuntu: Management lessons from South Africa. *Academy of Management Executive*, 15(3), 23-33.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publication.

Nkomo, S. M. (2011). A Postcolonial and Anti-Colonial Reading of 'African' Leadership and Management in Organization Studies: Tensions, Contradictions and Possibilities. *Organization: The Critical Journal of Organization, Theory and Society*, 18 (3), 365-386.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seale, C. (1999). *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications

Stenbacka, C. (2001). Qualitative research requires quality concepts of its own. *Management Decision,* 39(7): 551-56.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basic Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures For Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publication.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales Of The Field: On Writing Ethnography.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wiegratz, J. (2009). *Uganda's Human Resource Challenge: Training, Business Culture and Economic Development*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.

Wood, G. & Horwitz, F. (2015). Theories and Institutional Approaches to HRM and Employment Relations in Selected Emerging Markets. In F. Horwitz & P. Budhwar (Eds.), *Handbook of Human Resource Management in Emerging Markets:* (19-41). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Wright, H. K. (2002). 'Notes on the (Im) possibility of articulating continental African identity. *Critical Arts* 16(2) 1-18

Yin, K. R. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Zoogah, D. B. (2008). African Business Research: A review of studies published in the Journal of African Business and a framework for enhancing future studies. *Journal of African Business*, 9 (1), 219-255