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African business leadership: Perspectives from aspiring young leaders

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Orientation: Although a lot is written about leadership in Africa, little empirical research has been conducted and published in prominent academic journals, which comprehensively and specifically define the concept of African business leadership.

Research purpose: The goal of the research study was to define the African business leadership comprehensively, tapping into the views of young leaders and making a contribution to the discourse and literature on leadership in Africa.

Motivation for the study: Whilst business leadership practices are deemed to be universal by some, others argue that the matter is geographically specific. The latter view is supported by those interested in decolonisation and Africanisation. Although politically inspired and philosophically embedded definitions of African leadership are readily available, definitions stemming from empirical processes seem to be absent.

Research approach, design and method: This research focuses on the sub-Saharan region, which accounts for the greater part of the African continent. A total of 121 adult students, representing 14 sub-Saharan countries, participated in this study. The participants were part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, a leadership development programme facilitated by the University of South Africa. A cross sectional survey design was used, as part of which open-ended questions were posed to the young leaders. Summative content analysis (Cohort 1) was uses to identify elements central to African leadership, and directed content analysis was then framed based on inter-relational plots, which include all these identified themes.

Method: A cross-sectional survey design was used, as part of which open-ended questions were posed to the young leaders. Summative content analysis (Cohort 1) was used to identify elements central to African business leadership, and directed content analysis (Cohort 2) was applied to verify the themes. A definition of African business leadership was then framed based on inter-relational plots, which include all these identified themes.

Main findings: Eight elements typical of African business leadership were identified and, following an analysis of inter-relational plots, a definition incorporating the participants' inputs was crafted. African business leadership is seen as unique to leaders on the continent (Afrocentric), as an act of service to the community (Ubuntu), operating in challenging and resource-deprived environments (because of the legacy of colonialism) and providing hope for creating a better future. African business leadership is further seen as being dominated by those in positions of (political) authority, who engage in entrepreneurial activities, and yet as still requiring development because many leaders are corrupt (brokenness), which seems to be legitimised by post-colonial sentiments (Afro-centric).

Contribution: The research study presents a multidimensional perspective on defining African business leadership, reiterating the admirable community orientation, but also the skill gaps, and therefore, the need for improvement.

Practical Implications: The definition crafted from the research study provides a compelling conceptualisation of a phenomenon that is often described from only a philosophical or political perspective. This empirical research study contributes to the leadership debate by providing a multidimensional and comprehensive definition of African business leadership, incorporating both the positive and negative elements.

Keywords: leadership; African; business; definition; conceptualisation; inter-relational plots.

Introduction

As a construct, leadership is associated with or believed to be key to organisational effectiveness or societal success (Garg & Ramjee, 2013). It is also associated with improved business operations

and performance (Mokgolo, Mokgolo, & Modiba, 2012; Thom, 2014), and is regarded as critical in shaping or directing people how to respond to change (Nkomo & Kriek, 2011).

The construct of leadership has received much attention from researchers or scholars around the world and across different disciplines (Marturano & Gosling, 2008). It is noted that whilst over the last two decades, leadership theories have been advanced exponentially (Dinh et al., 2014), there is still no universal understanding or agreement on the definition thereof (Bolden & Kirk, 2009). Given the many and varying definitions of leadership that have been posited, the common ground remains elusive, and the likelihood of agreement on what it entails remains farfetched (Abebe, Lado, & Tekleab, 2020; Grint, 2005; Kalunga, 2009; Metz, 2018).

Notable in the leadership literature is the evolution in the definition of leadership, as reflected in various leadership theories (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). These developments illustrate that as a construct, leadership is dynamic, and that the definition is specific to a point in time.

During the 1980s, a series of studies emerged, suggesting that culture provides a frame of reference or logic by which leadership behaviour can be understood (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Dorfman et al., 2006; Kuada, 2010). This perspective on culture was made popular by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) research project, which expanded on the implicit leadership theory with a focus on understanding leadership, culture and organisations globally. According to the GLOBE study in 2004 (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), individuals from the same cultures, given their shared beliefs, share implicit belief systems about ideal leaders. It is on this basis that the primary intent of their research was to investigate the fundamental question of the relationship between culture and leader effectiveness (Hoppe & Eckert, 2012). The GLOBE research study measured the role of culture in different countries, industries and organisations, with over 17 300 middle managers from 951 organisations spanning 62 countries (House et al., 2004). The GLOBE finding on culture and leadership provides a view of how individuals within cultures are different from or similar to one another in their perceptions and expectations of leadership effectiveness.

The GLOBE research project originally defined leadership as 'the ability to motivate, influence, and enable individuals to contribute to the objectives of organizations of which they are members' (House et al., 2004, p. xxii). In 2014, the GLOBE study defined leadership as 'the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members' (House, Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, & De Luque, 2014, p. 17). (The latter definition introduced the element of enabling organisational effectiveness beyond just delivering objectives, which may relate to broader corporate responsibility.) It is not the elements of leadership that seem to evolve, but rather what leadership aims at in a given context that seems to do so.

The research behind GLOBE has influenced and shaped thinking on understanding leadership effectiveness, given the different contexts within which the leadership is practised. Nonetheless, there continues to be a persistence in both empirical research and organisational fields to try to explain universally what makes an effective leader, in general, and across contexts (Abebe et al., 2020; Fourie, Van der Merwe, & Van der Merwe, 2017; Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013). The GLOBE project showed that 'the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others' differs across nations and regions.

The GLOBE research project's consideration of the characteristics of outstanding leaders in different contexts, with a focus on nation states and regions, has contributed to leadership debate. Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin and Taherdoost (2017) wrote that the conceptualisation of leader effectiveness is very challenging. They attribute this to the diversity of the theories posited and to empirical research findings on what makes an effective leader and how that is to be measured. Metz (2018) adds that in the light of the conflicting value systems around the world, it is not easy to reach a universal consensus around what makes a good leader.

In line with the GLOBE research, leadership practices embedded in Western leadership paradigms are increasingly being questioned (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Eyong, 2017). There is also growing movement, suggesting that leadership should be understood within the context in which it is practised (Adewale, 2020; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Fourie et al., 2017; Grobler & Singh, 2018; Humphreys, Zhao, Ingram, Gladstone, & Basham, 2010; Iwowo, 2015; Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012; Lee, 2011; Littrell & Nkomo, 2005; Mbigi, 2000, 2007; Mboup, 2008; Muchiri, 2011; Posner, 2012; Van der Colff, 2003; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Aryee, 2011). This growing research into understanding the role of context as part of understanding leadership further confirms the need for conceptual clarity on the definition of leadership.

One of the contexts that has drawn attention regarding the uniqueness of its leadership is Africa. It has been observed that the global leadership practices of the 18-20th centuries were influenced by Eurocentric theories and narratives (Booysen, 2001; Eyong, 2017), which do not reflect the indigenous dimensions and contexts that are critically important to understanding leadership in Africa (Wanasika, Howell, Littrell, & Dorfman, 2011). Researchers, such as Bolden and Kirk (2005), Chasi and Levy (2016), Chatbury, Beaty and Kriek (2011), Littrell and Nkomo (2005), Spangenberg and Theron (2016) and Walumbwa et al. (2011), make compelling arguments that Africa has its own values and practices, and that these should be an integral part of leadership practices for the continent. The authors, such as Obiakor (2004), Grobler and Singh (2018), Grobler and Flotman (2020) and Msila (2008), have criticised Western theories on practices of leadership in the African context outright and have called for an African-centred leadership approach that is relevant to the values of Africans. Whilst these researchers (Grobler & Flotman, 2020; Grobler & Singh, 2018; Msila, 2008; Obiakor, 2004) argue against the Eurocentric approach to leadership

and leadership development programmes, they provide no evidence of a clear definition of what leadership is for Africa.

In a quest to contribute to the academic body of knowledge about leadership within the African context – building on work conducted by Bolden and Kirk (2019), Chatbury et al. (2011), Kuada (2010), Grobler and Singh (2018), Littrell and Nkomo (2005), Le Grange (2011), Metz (2018), Ncube (2010), Spangenberg and Theron (2016), as well as Wanasika et al. (2011) – this research article shares an alternative perspective on how the construct of business leadership is understood in Africa. This research study makes a valuable contribution by providing a conceptually broad-based definition of African leadership, not built upon political or philosophical foundations but constructed from empirical research findings.

African leadership

Despite growing interest in understanding what leadership means in Africa, empirical research on the subject is sparse (Abebe et al., 2020; Kuada, 2010; Lerutla & Steyn, 2017; Wanasika et al., 2011). Esteemed authors, such as Mbeki (2005), Mbigi (2007), Mutwa (2019) and Mutwa and Larsen (1996), have also dedicated their focus and work on ideological and political matters on the subject of leadership. Notably, several researchers reported that very little academic research has been conducted towards understanding leadership in Africa (Amah, 2019; Cerff, 2017; Gumede, 2017; Kuada, 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2011).

A recent review of prominent academic publications on scholarly and peer-reviewed leadership articles, from 1980 to 2020 found that empirical research on leadership in Africa is still in its infancy (Abebe et al., 2020).

There is sparse evidence of empirical, peer-reviewed journal publications on the definition of leadership in Africa. Lerutla and Steyn (2017) undertook a systematic review of literature[1] on African leadership and listed only 13 scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles on African leadership. At the time the literature review was conducted, only five of these articles focussed on business leadership. In their research, they found that only Bolden and Kirk (2009) included cultural factors in their conclusion on leadership in Africa.

Bolden and Kirk (2009) argued that Africans aspire to a leadership based on humanity, a leadership that is inclusive, and one that values individual differences with a desire to serve others. They argue that there is a pattern unique to Africa, which can be associated with the belief system and philosophical principles of Ubuntu, a term that represents African humanism and that is often translated as 'I am because we are'. Ubuntu is seen as a fundamental philosophy that governs existence and social relations in sub-Saharan Africa (Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi, 2000; Wanasika et al., 2011). It is premised on respect for the dignity of people, reciprocity in social relations and a desire for tolerance and forgiveness.

1.See the inclusion and exclusion criteria used by Lerutla and Steyn (2017), which explains the small number of articles found.

The leadership philosophy of Ubuntu as a practice has received attention in research as a key consideration to determining what leadership in Africa entails (Grobler & Singh, 2018; Le Grange, 2011; Muchiri, 2011; Nzimakwe, 2014), although very little empirical research has been conducted on the concept to determine its effectiveness in leadership practice (Brubaker, 2013). Gumede (2017), Mbigi (2000) and Van Rensburg (2013) stated similar sentiments along the lines that African leadership is grounded on Afrocentric histories, philosophies, epistemologies and other pan-Africanist ideologies within the evolving African cultures. Metz (2018, p. 42) also talks about an Afro-communal ethic type of leadership, which is unique to Africa, based on the belief that 'one should relate communally'.

Afro-communal leadership is associated with a specific form of servant leadership, not in a way understood in the Western context, but servant leadership distinguished as leaders' interest in meeting the needs of others, with emphasis placed on communal relationship (Metz, 2018). In his address to a group of leaders, Khoza (2012) linked leadership in Africa to humanness and further argued that the human style of leadership generated by African humanism puts people first. Mbigi (2000) identified five core values associated with African leaders: respect for the dignity of others, group solidarity, teamwork, service to others and the spirit of harmony and interdependence. The GLOBE research findings also reported that sub-Saharan respondents mostly supported aspects, such as human-oriented, charismatic or value-based and team-oriented leadership (Hoppe & Eckert, 2012).

An analysis of different media articles, describing leadership and culture in the sub-Saharan context, paints a gloomy picture, highlighting five themes used in reference to leadership across the media: corruption, poverty, tribalism, desire for change and economic development (Wanasika et al., 2011). Although it could be argued that newspaper reports do not necessarily provide scientific data on leadership, they tend to reflect and inform perceptions on matters of social interest. Along similar lines, Kuada (2010, p. 10) wrote that whilst there is limited research conducted on African leadership, the general view in the available literature is that 'African leaders are terribly ineffective', and that some aspects of African culture may constrain effective leadership.

Some researchers have demonstrated elements unique to African leadership (Brubaker, 2013; Grobler & Singh, 2018; Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi, 2007; Metz, 2018; Setlhodi, 2018), with Ubuntu (as mentioned above) being a good example of this. Other researchers, using Western conceptualisations of leadership, such as Avolio and Bass (2005), Bolden and Kirk (2009), Kuada (2010), Mbigi (2000) and Mokgolo et al. (2012), have quantified the prevalence of transactional leadership in Africa. This was performed using Western conceptualisations, in this case transactional leadership, to inform leadership practices in Africa.

This research study draws on the culturally endorsed leadership (CLT) theory as the reference discourse to explore

and understand leadership in the African context (House, Javidam, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). This theory builds on the implicit leadership theory which argues that every individual holds implicit belief systems, perceptions and expectations about what 'good leadership' entails and, similarly, that people of different cultures would have different views of what 'good leadership' requires (Muralidharan & Pathak, 2018). In their research, Muralidharan and Pathak (2018) also revealed that leaders who display attributes aligned with followers' implicit expectations are more likely to be accepted, and that the location and culture within which leadership occurs have a contextual relevance as part of the leadership discourse.

Research objectives

Aiming to contribute to the body of knowledge, this research study endeavours to construct an operational definition of African leadership, not based on a singular philosophical or political viewpoint but rather on the culmination of the ideas of multiple informants, using a systematic research process.

Research methodology

Design

The research study followed a qualitative approach, where data were collected using open-ended questions presented to the participants in a survey format. This was a cross-sectional study.

Data collection

Data collection was limited to three open-ended qualitative questions that probed participants' views on the construct of leadership. The questions were presented one-at-a- time (in sequence), and the participants were encouraged to take their time in answering each question before proceeding to the next question. The key question was the second question in the series, concerning the African business leadership, and only findings relating to this question are presented here. The first was a priming question, which read as follows: '[w]hat is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about business leadership?' The second question, the one on which is reported in this research, was '[w]hat is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about African business leadership?' The last question, not analysed in this article, read as follows: '[w]hat is the main difference between African business leadership and what is commonly known as *Western leadership*?'

Participants

The participants were delegates to the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) leadership development programme, run and facilitated by the University of South Africa (UNISA) Graduate School of Business Leadership. The participants were selected for the development programme based on their leadership qualities and potential, as assessed by YALI selection committees. Data were collected in 2019. All delegates (150 for Cohort 1 and 151 for Cohort 2) were invited to participate in the research study and, therefore, no sampling was conducted. Given that participation in the study was voluntary, the delegates were free to opt out or to withdraw at any point during the process.

Some did so by not attending the assessment session, whilst others did so by providing inadequate information on the answer sheets. Incomplete questionnaires were discarded. As can be seen from Table 1, 121 participants from 14 sub-Saharan African countries (see Table 1) completed the questionnaire. The response rate thus varied between 34.6% (Cohort 1) and 45.7% (Cohort 2).

From the above, the diversity of respondents in terms of geographic representation, gender and age groups is evident. It is notable that the respondents in both cohorts are relatively young and marginally over-representative of women. The YALI-programme managers were not keen on allowing the researchers to collect data pertaining to race and, in line with this, no such data were collected in this study. Taken at face value, the cohorts were very similar.

Data analysis

The data gathered from the two cohorts were captured on separate spreadsheets. Thematic content analysis was conducted as this type of analysis was suitable for identifying and organising themes found within a dataset (Nowell,

TABLE 1: Study participants.

Demographic	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
N	52		69	
Percentage women	40.00		39.00	
Percentage men	57.60		56.52	
Unclassified (%)	1.96		4.34	
Age	Mean = 28		Mean = 26	
	SD = 3.83		SD = 3.41	
Country of citizenship	Angola = 1;	Botswana = 3;	Angola = 3;	Botswana = 8;
	Comoros = 1;	Eswatini = 2;	Comoros = 4;	Eswatini = 4;
	Lesotho = 3;	Madagascar = 8;	Lesotho = 3;	Madagascar = 5;
	Malawi = 4;	Mauritius = 3;	Malawi = 8;	Mauritius = 1;
	Mozambique = 3;	Namibia = 6;	Mozambique = 3;	Namibia = 2;
	Seychelles = 1;	South Africa = 13;	Seychelles = 1;	South Africa = 15;
	Zambia = 3;	Zimbabwe = 1.	Zambia = 7;	Zimbabwe = 5.

SD, standard deviation.

Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). The data from Cohort 1 were independently analysed by the three researchers using summative content analyses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Themes identified covered related or similar responses, which had a frequency higher than three in the dataset.

Researchers first compiled the lists of themes individually. After compiling their own lists, the researchers consulted with each other and compiled a list of the dominant themes on which they could agree.

Armed with this list, the three researchers visited the data captured from Cohort 2 and used directed content analyses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to verify the themes, as well as to identify additional themes. The task was first performed by the researchers individually, and then later as a group. The replicability of data obtained from the second cohort could potentially confirm the dependability and trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) of the identified themes.

In the next phase of the research, a definition of African business leadership was formulated. Working independently, each researcher used the combined list of themes, as identified from Cohort 1 and modified using the results from Cohort 2, to draw inter-relational plots. Drawing inter-relational plots involves drawing a chart in which variables are logically linked, with the aim of creating an 'argument', which includes all the variables, ideally in the form of a closed loop (Dinno, 2015; Puccia & Levins, 1985). The researchers first constructed individual plots. The individual exercise was followed by a discussion on the various plots amongst the researchers and, after consultation, agreement on an integrated inter-relational plot, which best represented all themes was reached. The narrative to describe these plots was then presented as a definition of African business leadership.

Ethical considerations

Access to participants was gained via the director of the YALI programme, and those who participated did so voluntarily. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained (Information redacted to maintain the integrity of the review process). In order to ensure honesty from the participants and to strengthen the credibility of the data, it was articulated that the researcher was independent of the (information redacted to maintain the integrity of the review process), and it was made clear to the participants that they had the right to participate or withdraw at any point without having to provide an explanation. The relatively low response rate, along with the (small) number of questionnaires that were left only partially completed, suggests that those who participated in the study did so freely, thus further strengthening the trustworthiness of the data. Raw data, as well as captured data, have been retained and may be requested from the primary researcher should any reanalysis of the findings be necessary.

Findings

In line with the research design, the findings are presented under two headings: the first relates to the theme identification (using Cohort 1) and the theme verification (using Cohort 2), and the second to the inter-relational plot, where the themes were graphically linked to each other in a coherent manner to create the definition.

Leadership theme identification and verification

Using the summative content analysis, each researcher identified themes from the data collected from the answers to the question on African business leadership. The individually identified themes are presented in Table 2.

The similarity between the themes identified from Cohort 1 by the three researchers was 0.91. This figure (0.91) represents the inter-rater reliability and was deemed to be acceptable. Following a lengthy discussion by the researchers, consensus on the following themes was reached:

1. *Brokenness* (including aspects such as corruption). Responses, such as 'corruption', 'non-transparent trade' and 'irresponsibility', informed the identification of this theme.
2. *Afrocentric* (referring to specific to a geographical area). Responses, such as Diamond Trenching', 'African Perspective' and 'continent', informed the identification of this theme.

TABLE 2: Themes as identified by researchers in Cohort 1 (*N* = 52).

Researcher 1: Themes identified	#†	Researcher 2: Themes identified	#	Researcher 3: Themes identified	#
Broken (i)‡	11	Corruption (i)	8	Negative (viii)	10
Local or specific (ii)	9	Afro-centric (ii)	12	Corruption (i)	8
Social empowering (iii)	7	Entrepreneurship (v)	6	Uniqueness (ii)	6
Lack of money (iv)	6	Community upliftment (iii)	4	Entrepreneurship (v)	6
Entrepreneurship (v)	6	Lack of resources (iv)	5	Position (vi)	4
Individuals or position (vi)	5	Development or need to improve (viii)	6	Development or empower (viii)	7
Management practice (vii)	5	Position of authority (vi)	6	Poverty or lack of money (iv)	7
Developing or immature leadership (viii)	5	-	-	-	-

†, The number of responses identified, which was used to compose the set theme.

‡, The Roman number in the brackets refer to the consolidated theme, which was identified following consultation between the researchers. These consolidated themes are presented below using the same numbering regime.

3. *Community* (suggesting to the advantage of all). Responses, such as 'social upliftment' and 'developing communities', informed the identification of this theme.
4. *Entrepreneurship.* Responses, such as 'African Entrepreneurship', 'Empowering Africa' and 'Economic development in Africa', informed the identification of this theme.
5. *Position of authority* (Business leaders having positional power). Responses, such as '[*n*]ames of African leaders' and '[*l*]leadership direction', informed the identification of this theme.
6. *Need to be developed* (Business leaders being under-qualified). Responses, such as '[*s*]till a long way to go', 'poor management', 'development and 'have to be improved', informed the identification of this theme.
7. *Lack of resources* (Having insufficient money to do business). Responses, such as 'poor', 'poverty', 'nothing', 'limited' and 'struggling', informed the identification of this theme.

In Cohort 2 (the control group), these themes were then verified by the researchers independently determining the extent of the overlap between the themes identified in Cohort 1 with those apparent in Cohort 2. Here, directed content analyses were performed, matching the existing themes with the themes that could be extracted from the new (Cohort 2) data.

From Table 3 (Column 1), it can be read that 47 of the 69 responses in Cohort 2 could be classified using the themes identified from the content analyses of the text analysed with Cohort 1 by Researcher 1. All the themes identified from Cohort 1 were replicated in Cohort 2, and this was interpreted very positively. This percentage overlap between the cohorts is interpreted as a reliability coefficient of the themes identified. This varied from 0.71 to as low as 0.55 (see Table 3). The relatively low overlaps may be because of the strategy followed to determine themes and matches (summative versus directed content analyses), and the possibility that the words and meanings thereof might have been interpreted subjectively by the respondents. Despite the fact that all themes from Cohort 1 were replicated in Cohort 2, an additional theme emerged from the data, which could not be matched with the Cohort 1 themes. Optimism towards growth (Researcher 2) and hope (Researcher 3) were identified as additional themes in the analyses of Cohort 2. Researcher 1 did not identify any related theme independently. After consultation, the researchers agreed to add *Hopefulness,* which refers to a belief that the future will be better than the present, to the list of identified themes. In total, eight themes were thus identified to be used in the inter-relational plot.

TABLE 3: Theme overlap (*N* = 69).

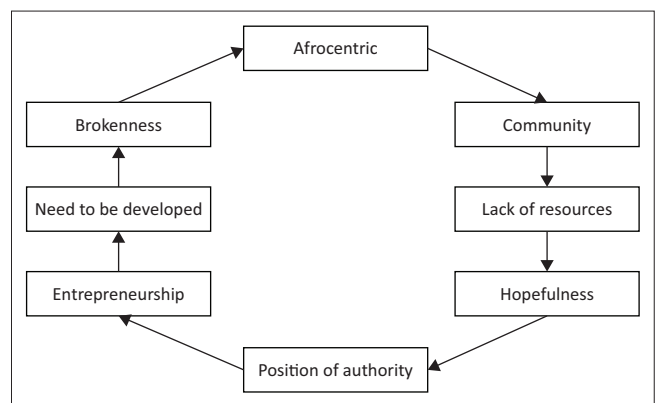| Researcher 1: Theme overlap	Researcher 2: Theme overlap	Researcher 3: Theme overlap
47/69 = 68.1%	49/69 = 71%	36/69 = 55%

FIGURE 1: Inter-relational plot on African business leadership. The eight themes are connected using an arrow to show their interrelation and how the one flows into the other, with 'Afrocentric' being the theme marking the point of departure.

Definition development using interrelational plot

Armed with a list of themes, the researchers set out to individually develop a definition of African business leadership. Again, the researchers joined to consider the individual plots and, after long discussions, arrived at the plot as presented below.

African business leadership is seen as unique (Afrocentric), with drive for service to the community (Ubuntu), operating in challenging and resource-deprived environments (because of the legacy of colonialism), and as hopeful of creating a better future. African business leadership is further seen as being dominated by those in positions of (political) authority, who engage in entrepreneurial activities, and yet as still requiring development because many leaders are corrupt (brokenness), which seems to be legitimised by post-colonial sentiments (Afro-centric). In essence, African business leadership is a humane, community and entrepreneurial-oriented leadership style focused on creating a better future for all.

Discussion

A qualitative research methodology was used to collect data from a group of 121 young leaders who attended a leadership development programme, in which 14 sub-Saharan countries were represented. The respondents were thus well qualified to answer questions regarding leadership practice in (sub-Saharan) Africa.

The themes were identified using three researchers, which speaks of the rigour of the research. Quite often, only one researcher performs such analyses. Moreover, data were collected from two cohorts, and the sequential analyses of the data, as well as the fact that the themes occurred across the cohorts, point to the quality of the data used.

Independent – and then, later integrated – inter-relational plots of the constructs, which represent African Business leadership, led to a comprehensive definition of the concept. The difficulty in incorporating eight constructs into a single definition represents some of the complexity of defining African business leadership.

The definition drawn from the inter-relational plot is partially supported by the narrative drawn from the literature, being that African business leadership is grounded in Afrocentric epistemology and the philosophical principles of humanity. This definition partially echoes previous research conducted by authors, such as Bolden and Kirk (2009), Gumede (2017), Mbigi (2000), Metz (2018), Mulemfo (2000) and Van Rensburg (2013), focusing on an Afro-centric leadership approach. The research study also verifies the importance of Ubuntu in leadership, as Khoza (2012) stated that the humane style of leadership generated by African humanism puts people first, and that leadership represents a meeting of spirits between persons and communities. The findings of the current research are consistent with those reported in the 2004 and 2014 GLOBE studies concerning sub-Saharan participants' support for and expectations of a human-oriented, charismatic or value-based and team-oriented leadership (Hoppe & Eckert, 2012). The definition of African business leadership, as presented in this study, also highlights a sinister view of leaders in Africa. Often, the respondents in this research study referred to the names of individuals when defining leadership (e.g. Isabel Dos Santos or Steve Masiyiwa/Jony Elemulu), as leaders often not referenced in the leadership literature, implying that business leadership is reserved for the few who are privileged by being politically connected. We have taken a note of the observations around corruption and brokenness in African business leadership, problems which undermine the vision to create a better and more hopeful future for all. The current research findings are in line with the consistently reported theme of corruption, and that African business leadership demonstrates a distinct ethical behaviour gap (Aswagen & Engelbrecht, 2009). These negative traits associated with African business leadership are also echoed in the newspaper analysis, as presented in the work of Wanasika et al. (2011).

The research study presents a multidimensional perspective on African business leadership, reiterating the admirable community orientation, the shortage of human capital as well as the need for improvement. Given that the respondents were young, it could also be expected that they were optimistic, a matter that was also factored into the definition.

Limitation of the study

Although the research methodology allowed for the verification of the data by collecting data from multiple cohorts, replicability by disciplined adherence to the research protocols, and the use of multiple coders and analysts strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the research still had its limitations. The primary concern was the small bits of data collected. The interpretation of captured data (from the response to 'What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about African business leadership?') was bound to be undertaken with a degree of subjectivity. Most likely, conducting focus groups could have better allowed the researchers to probe more deeply into the respondents' thinking about their perceptions of what African business leadership entails and how culture influences leadership in Africa. Another shortcoming is that no member

checking was done. Each participant provided a small part of the definition, and the researchers merged these words and phrases into a narrative (through the inter-relational plot). It would have been extremely interesting to receive feedback from the participants as to what the combination of their responses would have meant to them.

Conclusion and recommendation for future research

The aim of this research study was to gain some insights into understanding how leadership in Africa is perceived and to use these insights in formulating an operational definition of leadership that is unique to Africa. Most of the literature reviewed on African business leadership, although sparse, confirmed the connection between African leadership and its geographical context. This research study affirms this notion. It also presents a specific definition of African business leadership, which includes the admirable, and also the disturbing. All parties, researchers and politicians alike are advised to consider the multi-facetedness of African business leadership in their deliberations. To call all African business leadership Ubuntu is naïve, in much the same way as it is also naïve to call all African business leadership broken (corrupt).

Researchers are called to prioritise broad-based, multi-dimensional and empirical research on African leadership and to collectively craft a solid understanding of African business leadership. Research funding institutions are encouraged to prioritise studies that focus on African business leadership, as this research has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of those in leadership positions. Such research studies will assist the academics responsible for leadership development interventions to shape purposeful and relevant initiatives for the upskilling of current and future leaders across the continent.

We recommend that future research on African business leadership should explore the extent to which the eight elements used to define African business leadership relate to the performance of organisations. Perhaps more fundamentally, researchers are encouraged to find enhancers (positive elements) or regulators (negative elements) for the elements, which makes up the African business leadership as presented here. In addition, researchers are thus encouraged to get rid of their biases when dealing with African business leadership, and to consider both the good and the bad embedded in the current definition.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contributions

The primary author contributed to data gathering and worked with the co-author in the analysis, literature review and the write-up of the document.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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