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EXPLORING OUTSIDER/ INSIDER DYNAMICS AND INTERSECTIONALITIES

Perspectives and Reflections From Management Researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa

Emanuela Girei and Loice Natukunda[1]

Introduction

In this chapter, we aim to contribute to the development of an intersectional approach to culture in cross-cultural management (CCM) studies by exploring the experience of insider and outsider ethnographers.

Our particular focus lies in ethnographic research, which can be understood as a 'frame of mind', informing both research and practice (Mahadevan, 2017, chapters 1 and 2). In this sense, managers can also act as 'ethnographers' if they wish to better understand how the people around them understand and interpret their realities and daily events.

Simply put, ethnographers seek to understand how groups of people make sense of their world. The underlying perspective adopted is informed by social constructivism, which suggests that reality is not objective but constructed via social contacts and interactions.

Critical ethnography, to which we refer, pays attention to and actively engages with the power dynamics shaping how reality is constructed. The underlying assumption is that the social construction of reality is not a neutral process, but it is rather affected by historic and structural inequalities and privileges that inform individual sense-making, performance and positioning. This means that no researcher, ethnographer, student or manager (nor their colleagues) can have a neutral, objective or detached position on how they try to make sense of their own and others' experience. In this regard, it is important to consider that most CCM knowledge originates from what is commonly termed the 'developed Western' world or the 'Global North'. More widely, it has been argued that management knowledge is firmly rooted in "Westocentric assumptions" (Prasad, 2009), as it has been predominantly produced in North America and the United Kingdom, ignoring non-Western organisations.

It is widely recognised that being an insider ethnographer (e.g., sharing key characteristics with the participants, such as skin colour or national/ethnic identity) or an outsider has a significant impact on the research process (Roger et al., 2018) and more generally upon management practice. However, in management studies, including mainstream CCM, insider and outsider identities have been predominantly conceived on the basis of nationality or national culture or both. This might lead to an understanding of cultures and identities as fixed and stable. Conversely, intersectionality invites us to consider two important caveats.

One is that culture (and identity) can and should be conceptualised beyond, across or within mere national borders. It is, therefore, possible to conceptualise culture (and identity) in the form of professional culture, organisational culture, gender culture and so on. Additionally, Mahadevan (2011) argues that all these levels of culture might be as equally powerful as the assumedly most important national culture. Thus, identities can go beyond nationality and geographical classification to cover a range of identities including age, caste, ethnicity, religious belief, sexuality, physical ability, personality and even class (Tinker and Armstrong, 2008: 53).

Secondly, we should recognise that our identities and affiliations are also positioned, framed and shaped by those around us (such as research participants and colleagues). Thus, we understand 'insider' and 'outsider' status as social and situational and continuously intersecting with other axes of identity; related, for instance, to skin colour, ethnicity, gender and class. However, intersectionality, as we understand it in this chapter, is not simply about adding identity markers, such as gender or race, to each other. Rather, it is about understanding how these markers interact among themselves and how such processes reinforce or potentially challenge existing inequalities and asymmetries. So, our chapter is not about the researchers' identities 'as they are' but rather about the processes and systems through which they are constructed ('made') and performed ('done').

Starting from this background, we also acknowledge that intersectionality has been often used (especially in management studies) as "a tool for collating and commodifying 'differences'" (Liu, 2018: 83), eschewing exploring interlocked systems of power and oppression, such as those dominating the academia and knowledge production more widely. In this sense, previous research has shown how an instrumental adoption of the notion of intersectionality, which positions race along with other axes of identities, can undermine efforts to address racism and marginalisation, while simultaneously reinforcing white privilege and domination (Rodriguez and Freeman, 2016).

Thus, although this chapter aims to explore how a focus on intersectionality might help supersede an understanding of identity and culture as fixed and stable and thus a rigid divide between insider and outsider researchers (looking specifically at sub-Saharan Africa), we shall do so acknowledging

the relevance of issues of race and racism, whiteness and blackness and wider asymmetries that have historically framed the relations between indigenous African populations and outsiders, and between African scholars and outsider scholars in academic knowledge production. Thus, as it will be discussed in the following pages, we do embrace the epistemological and political value of intersectionality, but we are also cautious and attentive not to obscure historically rooted and still existing asymmetries including those shaped by race and skin colour.

Thus, the twofold argument we develop in this chapter on one side explores how a focus on intersectionality helps CCM scholars and practitioners working in sub-Saharan Africa to supersede rigid understandings of insiders and outsiders. On the other side, it emphasises the importance of recognising our own different positioning in the wider context, and in the wider systems of domination and oppression, such as those that have shaped academic knowledge production so far.

The chapter is divided into four further sections. In the next section, we introduce some key methodological issues that lie at the foundation of this research. Then, we present the case studies and the empirical material, reflecting on how identity is continuously constructed along with the research process and on its role in the knowledge production processes. This is followed by a section that highlights some key issues regarding power dynamics, identity and CCM knowledge. The final section highlights some recommendations for colleagues, students and practitioners engaging in CCM in the Global South.

Methodology

This case draws on two kinds of sources, namely our own experience and qualitative interviews. More specifically, we had several reflexive meetings, which focused on our experience as insider (Loice) and outsider ethnographers (Emanuela) with organisations in sub-Saharan Africa. They attribute meaning to their working contexts and guide their actions and decisions.

In addition to the authors' reflexive meetings, this research also draws on in-depth interviews with five insider and five outsider researchers selected through snowball sampling. These 10 researchers all have experience of doing research in sub-Saharan Africa with national organisations, including nongovernmental organisations, primary schools, social enterprises and local government. Organisations were located in rural areas, small town centres as well as major cities in sub-Saharan Africa. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to, as much as possible, reflect and share their experiences of doing research in an Africa-based organisation. Interviews lasted approximately one hour; they were all recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Case Presentation and Reflexive Considerations

In this section, we first explore the authors' research context and introduce some key reflections. We then analyse further some key issues, also drawing on participants' views, which we discussed during in-depth qualitative interviews.

Emanuela

I worked as a management advisor and researcher in Uganda with different nonprofit organisations, mainly working in rural and semirural settings. For instance, one of them was based and operated in a rural setting, with a minimum level of infrastructure (e.g., there was no electricity and no running water) and worked especially with farmers. The other two organisations I worked with were based in semirural small towns and operated in rural areas with a variety of groups (such as women, farmers, schools). All these organisations had less than 10 members of staff and were entirely dependent on foreign donors' funds.

   As an organisational psychologist with 15 years of experience in a similar role in Europe, I saw these assignments as an opportunity to reflect more systematically and widely on my practice, as they evoked a number of questions regarding the appropriateness of my background in such a role, and the impact of my own identity and positionalities. More specifically, since the beginning of my work with them, I had to constantly take into account my identities, for several reasons. For instance, my whiteness was a clear identity marker, which was constantly emphasised in several ways by the people I met and with whom I worked, which compelled me to continuously investigate my whiteness, not as a physical marker, but as a 'performative identity' (Liu, 2018: 88) which shapes power dynamics and the relational constellation of the research context. In addition, I was a management advisor and researcher and I was expected to provide guidance on management and organisational issues. However, although I was committed to challenging the Westocentric nature of management knowledge, I often perceived the ambiguity in my position, caught between being committed to critiques on the Western gaze on the Other and sensitive to the marginalisation of African voices and scholars on the one hand, and, on the other hand, being a white Western woman studying Ugandan organisation.

Loice

I did ethnographic research with one of the Ugandan agricultural research organisations which had slightly over 500 employees. The employees came from all over the country and thus had varied cultural backgrounds, since Uganda is

comprised of over 50 ethnic groups. Besides, some projects were internationally funded and controlled, with both national and international staff.

Along this research, I experienced what could be called a double insider positionality. I am black Ugandan and have been raised in Uganda, and I also had worked at the case organisation prior to returning there as a researcher.

However, although it could be assumed that my nationality and previous experience with the organisation were an advantage in negotiating what would be naturally considered to be cultural boundaries, my experience was more complicated than this. Because I had worked in the organisation as a line manager, participants were, in some instances, looking at me as a top management representative. In addition, despite being black Ugandan, I had been educated abroad and my education and exposure to foreign culture somehow disqualified me from the insider positionality. And I was often reminded: "You've changed, remember this is Kampala, it's not Europe". In other terms, my old identity as manager and my foreign education seemed to prevail on my national/ethnic identity and this supports the notion that categorisation of culture goes beyond nationality, as discussed previously.

Towards an Intersectional Approach to Insiderness and Outsiderness

Starting from quotes taken from our reflective meetings and the interviews with our colleagues, in this section we discuss two key issues that emerged from our data related to researcher's identities and intersectionalities, namely precarious identity's boundaries, and endogenous/indigenous knowledge.

Importantly, and in line with our commitment to acknowledging historically rooted asymmetries between indigenous and outsider scholars in the production of knowledge about sub-Saharan Africa, we shall use the 'insider' and 'outsider' labels when referring to the research participants.

Precarious Boundaries

With precarious boundaries, we intend to highlight how our identities are not fixed and stable, but rather are continuously shaped and negotiated through the encounters we make, and such processes can hardly fit rigid categorisation along national, colour and ethnic boundaries.

For instance, although researchers working in sub-Saharan Africa can, to some extent, be distinctively labelled using the insider/outsider markers due to skin colour and nationality, one clear aspect that emerges from our data is the complexity and diversification of national culture, which makes the 'insider' label particularly precarious or unstable. For example, from our data it emerges that, although the 'insider' label may presumably fit a black national born and raised in sub-Saharan Africa, it often happened that researchers were positioned as nationals and yet as outsiders, as discussed by Diane:

> I am of the same nationality with them but I was a total foreigner among them. So, when you are talking about a foreigner doing research among natives; I was typically that among native Ks.
>
> *(Diane, Insider Participant)*

This quote shows that sharing the national cultural background does not ensure neither familiarity nor higher ability or possibility to understand the local context. Previous research has explored the distinctiveness of doing research in Africa from an insider status (e.g., Natukunda et al., 2016), highlighting a set of distinctive dimensions, including those related to the impact of Western knowledge systems but also regarding a set of specific challenges faced by native researchers along the research process, from access to participants to the politics of representation (Natukunda et al., 2016).

In addition, both insider and outsider researchers highlight how their role and their status are profoundly unstable and continuously shifting, as discussed in the following quotes:

> Yes, I felt that I was not trusted especially at the beginning of the study. At times, I would be speaking to them and then they switch to their local language which I did not understand. That would happen when I was not with the interpreter. That died off over time and they got free with me.
>
> *(Clare, Insider)*

> But along the research, it happened that I was in a situation where I was an insider . . . Or if I was in a meeting or workshop with different organizations, if I was there with my colleagues, I felt an insider with the organisation even if there were other people from Europe, I felt closer with the organization [I was working with] than with other [white] people.
>
> *(Sarah, Outsider)*

These quotes not only highlight the plural, constructed and shifting nature of our identities, but also emphasise the need to acknowledge that our identities and affiliations are positioned, framed and shaped by the research participants and the research context more widely. This supports those critiques toward a homogenised and simplified conceptualisation of national culture (common in mainstream CCM studies) and invites us to embrace notions such as 'multiple cultures' and 'cultural complexity' (Mahadevan, 2011), which frame culture as a fluid, in-progress, multifaced, context-bound system, and recognise that within the same national borders a plurality of cultures coexists.

This does not mean that insider and outsider researchers share the same experience. For instance, outsider researchers discussed at length their own subject position, especially with regard to their whiteness. From our research, it emerges that virtually all white researchers and practitioners with experience of empirical

work in sub-Saharan Africa are, sooner or later, compelled to deal with their whiteness, here understood not as a physical attribute, but rather as performative identity resulting from historically rooted asymmetries and privileges, that, as shall be discussed in the following sections, can and should be challenged.

Indigenous/Endogenous Knowledge

Another key issue that emerges from our data are the categories of indigenous and endogenous perspectives. This relates to the quality, depth and authenticity of the knowledge produced by insiders and outsiders and their abilities or possibilities to further and strengthen what is usually called 'indigenous knowledge'.

In general, there is no guarantee that 'insiders' or native African researchers would be better positioned than Western native researchers for indigenous knowledge generation. For instance, one of our participants expressed the following:

> There is a debate about how African scholars should engage a lot with African issues because they may understand them better; that's the assumption. A lot of literature on management in Africa is produced by Europeans and all the other people. Some people are advocating for Africans to study Africa. But your experience and mine as well shows that we are actually not 100% conversant with our own society.
>
> *(Maria, Insider)*

However, while many of our participants agreed that, in itself, the insider/outsider identity does not necessarily ensure either better relations or easiness to understand the local contexts, it also clearly emerged that the lack of empirical research in sub-African contexts hampers the research process and the production of knowledge responsive to the local context, as outlined here:

> I am also doing a literature review on the same area and I have got more than 1000 papers of research work done and less than 20 are from researchers based here. It is a serious issue. When these [Western-based researchers] people write, they push their own perspective and interpretations. It doesn't help us. So, we need people who are based here who can generate knowledge that has that flavour of here.
>
> *(Grace, Insider)*

> We are quite limited sometimes as Western researchers because we are theoretically sensitized and the whole theories and concepts that we are basing our study on are Western to start with. So, it's about challenging those things, it's about seeing everything from a different point of view which I think is absolutely essential and most studies should be carried out from the African perspective to start with instead of the Western as a

point of reference unfold. And for that, I think it's very important to have African researchers doing that. But that's why I think that there is a synergy or at least a symbiosis if we combine two researchers from different backgrounds. I think that could lead to very valuable research.

(Claire, Outsider)

Her (a Ugandan colleague) supervisor happened to come and he was white. When he was there, people started to talk, to participate actively in the research . . . People think that when someone of a different colour comes to study about your community, in the back of their mind maybe this person has some projects or interventions that will help. [. . .] also, there will be some persons that will want to be associated with a white researcher, just for a question of status, and thus they are willing to volunteer information.

(Rob, Insider)

Thus, because of the multiple intersecting identities and positionalities, including multiple outsider and insider status, the assumption that an insider may be better positioned in the process of indigenous knowledge generation about Africa may need to be reconsidered. Good research practices and good data are often the results of insiders' and outsiders' collaboration, as well as of reflections on identity-making and knowledge-production processes and the relations among them. These reflections cannot eschew acknowledging the domination of Western perspectives in management studies, including in CCM, and the simultaneous neglect of alternative views, which we discuss in the following section.

Power and CCM

From the previous sections, there emerge two key issues that are particularly important for CCM researchers and practitioners. One refers to how power dynamics shape our identities and those of the persons around us, and the other refers to knowledge and the process through which it is developed and used.

Starting with the latter, in the previous pages we have highlighted that when undertaking management research and work in cross-cultural contexts, one of the challenges that needs to be addressed is the dominance of Western perspectives and the simultaneous neglect of alternative views.

To this regard, several pieces of research have exposed that management knowledge, despite its universalistic pretentions, has been developed mainly by Western (especially Anglo-American) scholars and has focused especially on organisations located in the United Kingdom and North America (Girei, 2017; Jack and Westwood, 2009). Importantly, this is true also for the field of CCM, which despite being focused on management "within, across, between and

beyond cultures" (Mahadevan, 2011: 3), not only has been broadly developed for and within Western circles, but also significantly neglected issues of power and inequalities, and contributed to nurturing Eurocentric understandings of management and organisations (Romani and Höök, 2010). Mainstream CCM is often underpinned by assumptions about the superiority and universality of the Western canon, which, in turn, wittingly or unwittingly contributes to promoting or justifying derogatory representations of management knowledge and practices coming from the rest of the world.

Thus, several scholars have called for stronger engagement within the field with issues of power and inequalities (Primecz et al., 2016), with endogenous knowledge and with historically marginalised voices (Jackson, 2013). In this regard, Jackson argues that we "need to look further to the way knowledge is created within the global context, the dynamics involved in this and the way these changing dynamics may construct different ways of interpreting these realities" (Jackson, 2014: 4).

However, this should not be unreflectively translated into a call for indigenous knowledge, as often happens, and this for two reasons. One is that the notion of indigenous knowledge is often embedded in a romanticised aura, but lacks clear definitions (Jackson, 2013). The second is that the common understanding of the term (which usually refers to what is local against what is global and from outside) is highly problematic because it neglects intersections of cultures and ways of knowing. For instance, it has been argued that Africa and the West are much more intermingled and internally diversified than assumed by binary thinking about local and global or Africa and the West (Appiah, 2007; Zeleza, 2005). Other scholars have pointed out that African and Western ways of knowing are both tainted by their encounter and neither of them can claim to be completely pure (Quayson, 1997). As we saw in the previous pages, this view is also shared by our interviewees, which openly discussed the inaccuracy of the assumption that Africa-based researchers are most suited for knowledge generation about the continent. In this sense, we find the notion of 'radical contextuality' (Escobar, 2008: 200) to be more productive. This notion calls for a stronger embodiment and embedment of context(s) (human, cultural, symbolic, economic and so on) in research and managerial practices and processes. In this sense, the priority for cross-cultural researchers and practitioners is to closely engage with the context where they are working, so to understand what is meaningful and what is relevant, thus expanding and diversifying CCM knowledge.

This leads us to the second key issue emerging from the previous quotes, related to identity and power dynamics. Although the previous pages invite us to go beyond rigid categorisation about insiders and outsiders, we think it is important to recognise different roles for researchers that come from abroad and researchers that live where the research takes place but also the histories they come from and with. We thus acknowledge that an incautious emphasis

on intersectionality might obscure historically rooted asymmetries and existing systems of oppression and privilege (Liu, 2018). For instance, it could be said that virtually all white researchers with experience of empirical work in sub-Saharan Africa are, sooner or later, compelled to deal with their whiteness, as it clearly emerged from the authors' and research participants' experiences. Here, whiteness is understood not as a physical attribute, but rather as performative identity resulting from historically rooted asymmetries and privileges. Thus, when we do research or managerial work in cross-cultural contexts or both, it is particularly important to position ourselves in the global context and reflect on how wider inequalities might impact in the specific context where we are working. For those committed to decolonising CCM research and practice, it becomes imperative to recognise and question these dynamics of privilege and power and open up possibilities for alternative ways of understanding, interpreting and interacting. In practice, this can be translated, in continuous self-reflective practices accompanied by a wiliness to learn new lenses to interpret the world around us and new ways of working.

Recommendations to Students, Researchers and Practitioners

In this concluding section, we summarise three key implications derived from our study. For each of them, we offer some questions to reflect on and recommendations.

Beyond Rigid Categorisation

A key point that emerges from our study is the need for students, researchers and practitioners to go beyond rigid categorisation of insider and outsider and to develop sensitivity and awareness of the continuous making and unmaking of our identities along the research process. The different encounters that we make and the different events that occur in how we make sense of CCM situations, as researchers and practitioners, continuously construct the relational settings we are involved in. This makes it possible for insider and outsider subjectivities to be simultaneously present or to move from one to the other several times. Another intertwined implication of our study is the centrality of an intersectional approach to identity, which requires not only to be aware of the different intersecting axes that make up our identities, but also to acknowledge how they together shape dynamics of power, privilege and oppression. It is thus important to ask: how is the insider/outsider boundary shifting in the specific relational context I am in? Which axes of identities are shaping the relational contexts and how? How are such intersecting identities shaping power dynamics? And are these power dynamics reproducing or contesting wider rooted asymmetries?

Beyond Indigenous/Endogenous, Towards Radical Contextuality

Our case suggests that rather than speaking of indigenous and endogenous knowledge, it might be more productive to focus toward a radical contextuality, so to privilege knowledge that makes sense in and is relevant to the specific context where we are working. This leads us away from romantic or exotic ideas of authentic knowledge, as well as abstract management ideas, which might not apply or be relevant in many CCM contexts.

Thus it is important as researchers and practitioners to ask: what do I know about the historical, political, economic and cultural context in which I am now involved? How does this knowledge guide how I interpret what is happening around me? How does my work here have an impact on these contexts?

Outsider/Insider Differentiation

Our case cautions against the dangers of an unreflective embracement of the notion of intersectionality, especially when it serves to conceal or overlook white privilege and wider asymmetries. In this regard, it is crucial for those engaged in CCM research or practice, and sensitive to the call for decolonising management knowledge, to position their own work in the wider context. This includes starting from the acknowledgment of the domination of Anglo-American perspectives in management and organisation studies and thus taking the specificities and dilemmas of working and doing research in the Global South into serious consideration. Crucial questions are thus: whose voices am I echoing? Who is benefiting from my research or practice? How does my research or practice contribute to decolonising management knowledge with regard to both its process and outcome?

Note

1. Alphabetical order; both authors contributed equally to the chapter.

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