

# Towards a Collective-Values Framework of Ubuntu: Implications for Workplace Commitment

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This research offers an extension of current research on commitment across cultures. It incorporates the concept of Ubuntu as an integrating model that can be paired up with other perspectives for directing employee workplace commitment.

**Research Design & Methods:** A literature review entailing concepts related to cross-cultures and their relationship to Ubuntu and commitment was considered. The review spanning 50 years covered online-databases of global and African research.

**Findings:** We argue here that the conceptualisation of Ubuntu is important in adapting currently accepted cultural frameworks as operationalised by individualism, collectivism and power distance dimensions for regional management application. Ubuntu collective values (compassion, survival, group solidarity, respect and dignity), which relate affirmatively with a sense of workplace collectivism, was identified as a unique element of cultural management philosophy for directing personal interactions, workplace commitment and performance management improvements.

**Implications & Recommendations:** Ubuntu should be facilitated by managers as a motivational force that facilitates workplace commitment ensuring organisational team performance. The implications of Ubuntu in the context of extending existing theories of individualism-collectivism and power distance cannot be overstated.

**Contribution & Value Added:** A model based on relationships between Ubuntu collective values and EWC, applicable with contextual managerial frameworks.

**Article type:** conceptual research article

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, research into organisational behaviour (OB) which encourages employee workplace commitment (EWC), organisational commitment (OC) and consequently organisational performance improvements, has gained attention (Dhar, 2015; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2016). Studies identified that workplace diversity derived from a region's culture has a profound effect on organisational performance potentials (Mangaliso, 2001; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003; Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin, & Sheppard, 2012).

Tett and Meyer (1993) stated that regional culture is a determinant of EWC and OB, yet it is overlooked as to the influence it has on management practice. The subjugation of African regional cultural influences, such as Ubuntu, is unfortunately rooted in colonialisation, industrialisation and their resulting life changes for African people (Msengana, 2006, p. iv). This article addresses the southern African indigenous knowledge of Ubuntu. For the purposes of this article, Ubuntu is defined by Khoza (2005, p. 269) as 'an African value system that is characterized by caring, sharing, compassion, communism and related predispositions'.

We argue here that the conceptualisation of Ubuntu is important in adapting currently accepted cultural frameworks as operationalised by individualism, collectivism and power distance dimensions for regional management application (Mbigi & Maree, 1995; Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). The specific aims are to:

- Review the influence of culture differences associated with power distance and individualism-collectivism on EWC (e.g. supervisor, work team or co-workers);
- Identify which attributes of employee commitment in Ubuntu community should be developed to enhance service quality behaviour and competitiveness;
- Draw up practical implications for management and workplace organisations with a theoretical model of Ubuntu collective values, and;
- Encourage an extension of current research on commitment and increase our global understanding of geographic cultural influences such as Ubuntu.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Development of Culture as an Influence in OB and OC

OC was viewed by Becker (1960, p. 33) as a resultant of an employee's tendency to 'engage in consistent lines of activity'. Building from this definition, studies identified EWC from various perspectives (Table 1).

Affective OC research by Mowday *et al.* (1979) is considered by LaMastro, (1999) as one of the most important approaches to OC. The latter pertains to EWC as defined in a specific referent (e.g. occupation, profession, staff-supervisor, teams). This was an important development as it explained to some extent EWC behaviour. Rousseau (1989) then argued that employees do demonstrate high levels of OC not only to career, but also to the organisation. Honeycutt (1989) then highlighted that this can translate into a sense of organisational belonging and corporate identity amongst one's peers. EWC was subsequently defined in terms of referent effects in its nature and origin as stabilising employee psychological mindset which, when managed, can give rise to a particular positive behav-

our (Meyer & Maltin, 2010, p. 324). Research has since encouraged a more people-centred approach to articulating factors that positively influence OC understanding of the culturally-driven importance individuals attached to group membership (Meyer, Morin, & Vandenberghe, 2015; Li, Kim, & Zhao; 2017). Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003) examined successful employee-supervisor linkage characteristics, moving away from the traditional focus of the employer OC. Perceived supervisor support (PSS) in supervisor-employee linkages was found to relate to how supervisor's views and values could lead to improved EWC. Mastrangelo, Eddy and Lorenzet (2004) suggested that 'negative workplace experiences of a supervisor seen as untrustworthy and uncaring by employees, makes them less committed to the work and to the organization' (p. 442).

**Table 1. Various conceptual perspectives of commitment**

| Affective commitment  | Continuance commitment  | Normative commitment  |
|---|---|---|
| 'A desire to stay with the organisation associated with his/her willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organisation and his/her trust in and acceptance of the values and goals of that organisation' (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1979, p. 226). | Stebbins (1970, p. 527) defines calculative or continuance commitment as 'the awareness of the impossibility of choosing a different social entity... because of the immense penalties in making the switch'. | Wiener (1982, p. 471) defines it as the 'totality of internalized normative pressures to act in a way which meets organisational goals and interests which suggest that individuals exhibit behaviours solely because 'they believe it is the right and moral thing to do'. |

Source: own elaboration based on literature.

Models of OC also began to identify numerous employee proxy variables, such as age, gender and number of years with the organisation, as having a role to play in OC (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Vveinhardt & Andriukaitiene, 2017). Multidimensional OC models incorporating these components and its influence on OB have become widely accepted (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Gellatly, Meyer, & Luchak, 2006). Various research now seek to understand EWC in terms of regional culture, perceived impact on leadership behaviours and its influence on OB as initiated by Hofstede (1980). Culture was defined by Hofstede (1980, p. 43) 'as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group of people from another'. The link of Ubuntu as a notion of collectivism within African cultures was espoused by Hofstede (1980) noting that in African culture the group has more importance than the individual so group success is more valued than individual success. Hofstede (1980) identified five cultural dimensions (individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-feminism and uncertainty avoidance) as a common basis for measuring the influence of a regional culture in OC.

Dimensions from Hofstede's framework: individualism, collectivism and power distance, have particular relevance in this discussion and are now described as underpinning Ubuntu cultural principles:

1. Power distance: The extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980, p. 52);
2. Individualism: The extent to which the identity of individuals in a society is based upon personal qualities (Hofstede, 1980, p. 52);

3. Collectivism: The extent which the identity of individuals or group memberships is based upon the community or organisation (Hofstede, 1980, p. 52).

'The Global Leadership, Organisational and Behavioural Effectiveness (GLOBE)' study by House *et al.* (2004) advanced arguments that individualism-collectivism and power distance were culturally and universally applicable. This fundamentally implied that, to succeed in a global business context, managers need the flexibility to respond positively and effectively by integrating different cultures to employee supervision, practices and values that may be dramatically different from what they are accustomed to (House *et al.* 2004).

These authors highlighted that management practice in the sub-Saharan African context is known for embracing humanness and interdependency as embedded in Ubuntu characterised by upholding group norms of reciprocity and suppression of personal interest for the good of the group. House *et al.* (2004) acknowledged culturally-endorsed leadership noting it as a distinctive philosophical concept that sub-Saharan Africa organisational managers should focus on when elevating EWC. Indeed, considerable research in the OB discipline has truly begun to review the influence of regions and associated cultures on management (Gellatly *et al.*, 2006; Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Meyer *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Astakhova, 2016; Li, Kim, & Zhao; 2017; Limpanitgul, Boonchoo, Kulviseachana, & Photiyarach, 2017; Valickas *et al.*, 2017). Ubuntu as a culture in management, centred in an African interpretation of humanness is now presented.

#### **Ubuntu as a Dimension of African Culture and Humanness**

As a culture, Ubuntu is attributed to the longings of African people for communal bonds that researchers aspire to explain. Christie, Lessem and Mbigi (1993) noted that Ubuntu in the community or workplace brings forth images of supportiveness, co-operation and solidarity. Ndaba (1994) and Battle (1996) proposed that the culture of Ubuntu reflects both an ontological and an epistemological stance in the African thought of Bantu-speaking people. In this context, the ideal upheld by Ubuntu is that it allows a person to grow and prosper in a relational setting by providing ongoing contact and interaction with others. These authors suggest that Ubuntu as a group culture does not however support oppressive communalism.

This is why Mangaliso (2001) argues that Ubuntu is a conventional wisdom that supports customs and practices that serve only the common good. Nussbaum (2003) added that Ubuntu cannot be considered synonymous with any existing paradigms applied in Western interpretations of individualism or collectivism, noting it expresses a unique African view of the world anchored in its very own person, culture and society which is difficult to define by current empirical Western contexts.

The defining of Ubuntu has not been restricted to academic writers. South African public figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former South African president Nelson Mandela used Ubuntu characteristics in public speeches to encompass a perspective that a person with Ubuntu as a culture sees others as fellow human beings. Tutu (1995, p.15) described Ubuntu as the essence of practising a culture of being human and a gift that Africa gives to the world. A more practical example of Ubuntu was provided by Mandela during a television interview with South African journalist, Modise (2006). Mandela described Ubuntu with a story, 'A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he

didn't have to ask for food or for water; once he stops, the people give him food and entertain him'. Mandela added that this was only one aspect of Ubuntu, as the concept can have various meanings as interpreted by each individual.

Mandela's sentiments with African traditions of hospitality are supported in academic treatise where Brotherton and Wood (2008) draw attention to African hosts who open his/her home to total strangers giving them a place to stay and a meal to eat although he/she knew nothing about them. This kind of hospitality exists as unlimited and is not guided by the parameters of laws and concepts (Westmoreland, 2008). From these famous orators to the academic writers, the denominators of Ubuntu seems to promote actions that are welcoming, concerned principally with sharing and sustaining human relations. It is argued here that Ubuntu is derived from efforts that explicate how peoples' actions interrelate to maintaining togetherness in a community.

As regards describing the meaning of African humanness in terms of individualism, collectivism and power distance, sub-Saharan connotations are described by phrases such as the Zulu, 'Umuntu-ngumu-ntu ngabantu', which means 'a person is a person through others' (Battle, 1996, p. 99). Mbigi (1997) and Metz (2007) support this suggesting that among South Africa Zulu and Xhosa people the notion that a person can only be a person through others is widely accepted. Many Zulu and Xhosa people also use terms like 'Sawubona' when they greet, which means, 'I see you (as human)' and 'Simunye' meaning 'we are one' as pre-proposed by Ubuntu.

This article posits then that Ubuntu characteristics are in management terms:

- Describing humanness-that may well be unique to an African management context and specifically Sub-Saharan contexts requiring the organisation to capture the essence of what it means to be 'we are one', resonating with employees in supporting their deeply held regional beliefs and cultural systems;
- Workplace commitment-ensuring burdens of the community of employees are shared so that no one is prejudiced;
- OC through OB as instigated by manager behaviour-which ensures the interest of the community of employees ahead of the interests of any individual.

### **Ubuntu as a Management Philosophy**

As a management philosophy, Ubuntu has been gaining rapid prominence recognizing the role of humanness that focuses on selflessness and commitment of an individual to one's community. In the domain of management, the community is that of one's daily work colleagues or team. An important articulation of the characteristics of Ubuntu as culture can be found in Mbingi and Maree's (1995) conceptual framework of Ubuntu, known as the Collective-Fingers' theory. Here, five values of Ubuntu are postulated as integral to its expression – survival, compassion, spirit of solidarity, respect, and dignity. This theory is analogous to describing the principles of community and togetherness of Ubuntu culture as a human hand. Accordingly, a hand perfectly represents the Ubuntu concept as it requires the collective co-operation of all fingers and the thumb to function optimally (Mbingi & Maree, 1995). These authors' draw on an African proverb in defining this model, noting that 'a thumb, although strong, cannot kill on its own', inferring it needs support from the rest of the hand.

Mbingi and Maree (1995) argue that this African proverb can be interpreted from

a managerial viewpoint, in two ways: firstly, the five fingers represent individual persons who act together in a collective manner in order to achieve a certain goal reflected by commitment to the organisation. Secondly, fingers represent key values that are necessary when forming and maintaining a collective culture (Mbigi, 1997). Ubuntu therefore can be seen as one of the indigenous knowledge mechanisms capable of promoting synergy and the creation of a whole that is larger than the sum of the individual parts (Mangaliso, 2001). Other studies (Poovan, du Toit, & Engelbrecht, 2006; Lutz, 2009) advocated that the five fingers can be compressed from five to four values combining respect and dignity as one. MacDonald *et al.* (2014) support this view suggesting that managers must lead their subordinates to build the solidarity and commitment required for strong workplace relationships, productive teamwork, and, strong loyalty to organisational goals.

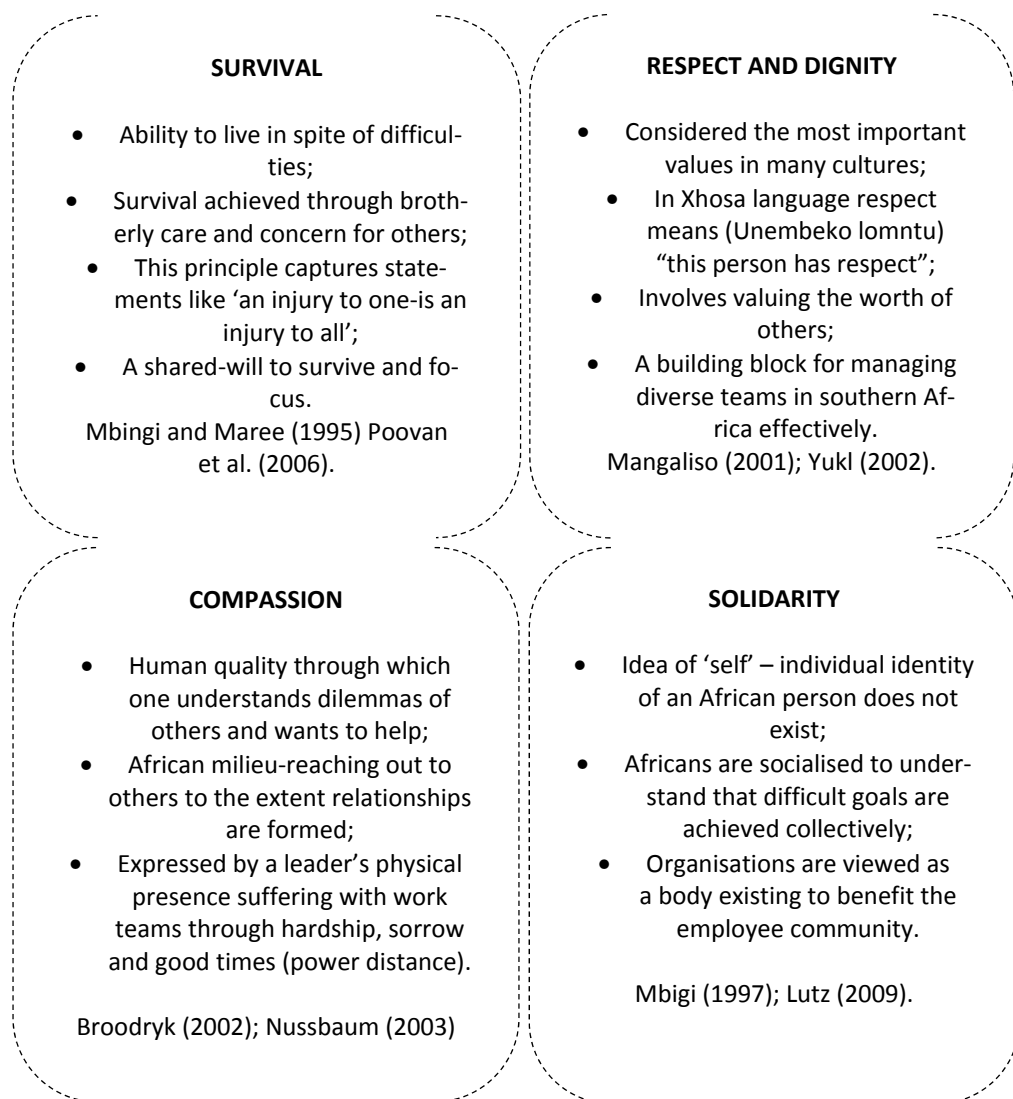
Another trend distinguishable since the 1990s is the use of the term Ubuntu as the connection between a leadership style and management, increasingly becoming important as a factor in the realm of South African management and organisational re-imagination (Mangaliso, 2001; Nussbaum, 2003; Nyathi, 2008). A recent theory of Ubuntu proposed by Woermann and Engelbrecht (2017, p. 4), ‘the relation-holder theory’, contends that Ubuntu promotes collective decision making and in management terms they explain Ubuntu in reference to the aphorism ‘a person is a person through others’, suggesting that a manager is a successful manager because of his/her team.

We now propose a theoretical framework based on the four Ubuntu values (Figure 1) as concepts drawn from literature to guide managers in developing the leadership characteristics appropriate to supervising a collective team in a South African workplace.

Applying the collective-fingers theory to team management promotes what Tutu (2004) calls ‘a family or an organization’. Tutu (2004) attributes Ubuntu to common understanding between the supervisor and work teams so that they help and care for each other as members of one family. Jackson (2004) remarks that Ubuntu’s point of departure should be centred on the leader’s actions (the thumb) as the driver of a cohesive force within the group promoting humanness and each team member’s interpersonal role.

### **The Power Distance Mechanism of Ubuntu in Workplace Commitment**

The power distance mechanism acting between employees and their supervisor under Ubuntu collective values, particularly that of compassion and of spirit of solidarity, and their associated influence on EWC and behaviour – are evident in very few studies. This suggests that empirical research examining Ubuntu in influencing EWC and work behaviour outcomes is still relatively unexplored in contemporary management literature. Ubuntu collective values and their influence on work behaviour, identified in the South African context, appear to be centred on managers who do not have an understanding of the implications for leading teams of various cultures and languages (Nicolaidis, 2010). Mangaliso’s (2001) research based on reviewing conceptions and reflections about experiences of Ubuntu found in South African private and state-owned enterprises stated that while Ubuntu might be difficult to prove by setting indicators, greater commitment to the goals of the organisation translating into measuring effectiveness and efficiency is indeed possible when Ubuntu is embraced. He highlights that this occurs because applying Ubuntu principles in leadership reinforce understanding among all employees, which results in group solidarity, teamwork and, collective pride in achieving organisational goals.



**Figure 1. Collective-values of Ubuntu framework**

Source: Molose (2017).

Mangaliso (2001) argues that helpfulness towards others in a work team creates a climate of collegiality based on sharing and caring because of an Ubuntu intrinsic understanding that all humans are interconnected. Poovan *et al.* (2006) provided empirical support, noting that Ubuntu allows for workplace personal understanding and caring, which enables team members to see themselves as belonging to a community even at work, and consequently they are more willing and committed to help each other and the organisation.

Browning (2006) found during interviews with frontline-employees of South African retail car companies and hospitality organisations that South African employees attach importance to building relationships, personal interaction and mutual respect as emphasized in Ubuntu culture. However, additional findings showed that managers failed to provide employees with the physical and emotional support needed when dealing with difficult guests. Browning (2006) concluded that managers who lead in a way that contradicts the expectations of their employees do not realize the positive influence they could have had through Ubuntu, which can influence employees positively when interacting with customers. The link between Ubuntu collective-values and EWC is evident in Batho Pele principles (people first) which are deliberately drawn on an Ubuntu model in South African government policy of 'serving people first' (Mangaliso, 2001; Yukl, 2002). Batho Pele is a government espoused, nation-wide initiative requiring public servants to be service-orientated, and to commit to continuous service delivery improvement (Batho Pele handbook, 2003).

Examples of companies and institutions that have adapted Ubuntu applying Batho Pele principles include: the Department of Education, American Express, First National Bank, Pick n Pay and South African Airways (Ngidi & Dorasamy, 2014). It is argued here that Ubuntu leadership style has the potential to overcome challenges that hinder multi-national team productivity and performance because it enables team members to tolerate each other's cultural differences that might otherwise result in low service delivery performance. We conclude that Ubuntu in management encourages team members to strive to enact the four values leading to a positive impact for EWC. We now propose the following propositions regarding management of the workplace in an Ubuntu culture centred community:

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**Proposition 1:** Employee commitment to co-worker and supervisor which are positively related to Ubuntu collective-values lead to employee collective achievement of service quality performance goals.

**Proposition 2:** Employee's service quality behaviour and OC will be mediated by Ubuntu values, when facilitated by a management style that ensures the interest of the community of employees ahead of the interests of any individual.

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## MATERIAL AND METHODS

Identifying literature associated with and appropriate for the argument presented in this article entailed a search for published empirical findings. Consistent with Cohen (1992, p. 1142), lists of secondary literature sources were reviewed to source past research. This strategy perused online databases, both global and African, for academic research (1960 to 2017), using Google scholar sourced articles, the South African catalogues of PhD theses, including PSYCINFO, SABINET, EBSCOHOST, Elsevier Science Direct, SAGE, Emerald, and, Taylor & Francis.

Secondary literature sources identified preliminary studies on OC and related variables from 1990 to 2002. These were used to identify older seminal sources that referenced Becker (1960) and Mowday *et al.* (1979). The search applied the search terms: OC, OB, organisational management, cross-culture, Ubuntu. This yielded 300 empirical and conceptual articles which were reviewed to reduce and rationalise the appropriateness of the context as per the 'prescribed criteria' (Zhao, 2016, p. 2437):



1. Reviewing social citation indices for the most cited studies to identify pertinent explanations of OC and OB;
2. Selecting studies and drawing explanations (from selected service business contexts that considered culture in management practice-financial services, the banking sector, and tourism and hospitality) that measured specific variables, namely those addressing cultural values with culture dimension predictors in OC relationships;
3. Considering research on organisational outcomes, such as service delivery quality, that integrate cultural dimension perspectives to construct a unified theoretical basis for understanding the development process of EWC in terms of Ubuntu;
4. Limiting our focus to cross cultural influences and target referents that conceptualised EWC from a person-centred approach (Meyer *et al.*, 2012). Reviewing EWC through the lens of Ubuntu proverbs creating value to an organisation's management by describing a particular set of African values to supplement more well-known cultural dimension frameworks.

Our review additionally highlights Ubuntu values from a sociolinguistic perspective, illustrated through a selection of African proverbs. Proverbs constitute one of the African mediums through which the virtues of Ubuntu are transferred from one generation to another (Kamwangalu, 1999). We followed Broodryk's (2002) recommendation suggesting the use of proverbs to articulate understanding of a community embracement of social values.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this article we address two contemporary research issues: firstly, the scarcity of research in contemporary management espousing an Ubuntu collective sense for management in developing supervisor-employee relationships. Secondly, the growing realisation that cultural dimensions viz.: individualism, collectivism and power distances that exist among employees of different cultures, such as in South Africa, are very important for managers to be aware of in attaining optimal workplace commitment. A simple way to effect the two propositions to encourage Ubuntu style of management is for a manager to demonstrate consistently the four Ubuntu values, by being present physically and emotionally when employees need to be one with their manager (Molose, 2017).

A manager stands to benefit when understanding it because of his/her team making him/her successful. This genuine authenticity/realness of their managers is postulated as improving EWC and OC. Ubuntu style leadership is argued here to help managers facilitate collective decision making by genuinely valuing the worth of each employee. This consequently creates organisational benefits through a shared will to succeed. We argue that adopting Ubuntu collective values provides a unique approach to managing teams, helping explain the importance of collective achievement of organisational goals. The challenge for managers is to take advantage of Ubuntu as a unique approach to be adopted in conjunction with established cultural dimension frameworks.

Theoretically, the collective values framework of Ubuntu has several potential advantages. It takes a multidimensional approach to avoid the cultural limitations of previous models. It also acknowledges that OC has different meanings to different people. Finally, the framework stresses the importance of Ubuntu motivational forces as mechanisms to

facilitate EWC, highlighting affective and normative mind-sets as the strongest components of OC in cultures that exhibit collectivist values.

## CONCLUSIONS

We argue that this framework gives insight into the heart of individualism-collectivism and power distance operationalisation, making the principle of Ubuntu cultural group solidarity important to consider in future management research. The framework with related propositions captures the concepts for managers striving to understand employee group cohesion mechanisms like 'we are one' related to optimising OC and OB. Organisational productivity requirements of managers, such as assuring service excellence suggest that EWC is inseparable from the team and its manager. The implications of Ubuntu in the context of extending existing theories of individualism-collectivism and power distance cannot be overstated. Therefore, to contribute to global management knowledge by interpreting Ubuntu, we borrow from an eloquent message by African author Nyathi (2008, p. 13):

'Ubuntu is a well-developed system of knowledge that stands in contrast to the dominant Euro-American epistemology. Articulating this alternative epistemology in the white-western world of organizational studies is an extremely challenging task (in the ways it raises 'lost in translation' type issues), but for an African person this challenge is not entirely new. It is an extension of struggles to articulate the identity of Africa and the Africans dating back to the late eighteenth century'.

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