

MEASURING ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

Dr. Michael Banutu-Gomez*

Rowan University

201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro, NJ (USA) 08028

Email: banutu-gomez@rowan.edu

Dr. Momodou Mustapha Fanneh

University of The Gambia

P.O. Box 3530, Serrekunde, The Gambia

Email: mmfanneh@utg.gm

Dr. I. Umaru Tanimu-Saminaka

University of The Gambia

P.O. Box 3530, Serrekunde, The Gambia

Email: dumaru@utg.gm

Dr. Joel Rudin

Rowan University

201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro, NJ (USA) 08028

Email: rudin@rowan.edu

*primary and corresponding author

Received: 2023-03-21

Accepted: 2023-05-22

Published online: 2023-06-13

Abstract

Organizational leadership in Africa is under-studied. Pan-African leadership theories have been proposed but it seems unlikely that the same leadership styles would be equally effective in every African country. For example, South Africa has much lower power distance and much higher individualism than Egypt or Nigeria according to the Hofstede system for classifying national cultures. The differences between South Africa and the other two nations appear vast enough to require different leadership styles. How can we cluster African countries into groups within which the same leadership styles will be effective? Our proposal is to conduct leadership surveys in multiple African countries and to examine the modal response in each country to each question. If the modal response is 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, the question should be retained. If the modal response is 3, the question should be dropped. If the modal response is 1 or 2, the question should be retained but reverse scored. Countries with similar modal responses may have similar optimal leadership styles. We illustrate how this could be implemented using data from a leadership survey conducted in The Gambia, a small nation in West Africa. We conclude with implications for research and practice.

Keywords: leadership, Africa, Gambia, research methods.

1. Introduction

Africa is the second-most populous continent on Earth, and more people live there than in Europe and North America combined (Statista Research Department, 2022). Yet we know far less about organizational leadership in Africa than in North America or Western Europe (Abebe, Tekleab, & Lado, 2020). Most academic studies of organizational leadership in Africa have been conducted in South Africa by South African scholars (Fourie, van der Merwe, & van der Merwe, 2017) which is a problem because there are fifty-three other African countries to which the South African research results may not generalize.

The purpose of this paper is to examine one issue in depth, specifically whether there is a pan-African leadership style. We review the evidence and conclude that it is unlikely that the same leadership style would be effective throughout the continent, then we explain how we can identify clusters of African countries within which the same leadership styles may be effective. We illustrate this approach using data from an organizational leadership survey in The Gambia, a small West African country that has been the site of few previous leadership research studies.

2. The Search for a pan-African leadership style

Business in Africa preceded its conquest by European powers, but the Europeans eradicated the preexisting indigenous leadership principles and substituted their own leadership systems (Zoogah, 2021). The search for a pan-African leadership style is therefore a laudable goal as part of the post-independence reclamation of African heritage and principles. While different alternatives have been proposed (e.g., Zoogah, 2020) the most popular and pervasive approach has been based on the concept of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu refers to an African value system and it has applications that extend beyond organizational leadership to include community building and conflict mediation (Halley, 2008), medical practice (Brink et al., 2020), and strategic planning (Sarpong, Bi, & Amankwah-Amoah, 2016). Within the context of organizational leadership, several scholars have attempted to articulate the principles of Ubuntu and their interpretations are not always consistent. For example, Laloo (2022) identifies four core characteristics of Ubuntu as they apply to leadership: inclusivity, promoting harmonious relations, respect, and cultural competency. Ncube (2010) specifies six principles of Ubuntu-inspired leadership: modeling the way, communal enterprise and shared vision, change and transformation, interconnectedness and empowerment, collectivism and solidarity, and continuous integrated development.

The evidence of Ubuntu-based organizational leadership in Africa is mixed. Grobler and Singh (2018) concluded that it is practiced in five southern African countries: Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. By contrast, Littrell et al. (2012), observed a disconnection between the principles of Ubuntu and actual managerial practices in Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Another debate, to which we shall return later in the paper, rages over whether Ubuntu leadership differs substantially from Western leadership philosophies (Ibeh, Eyong, & Amaeshi, 2022; Verhoef, 2021).

It seems unlikely that a single leadership style will be equally effective throughout the African continent (Blunt & Jones, 1997). One complicating factor is that Africa is tremendously diverse so that each of its countries is multilingual and multiethnic (Chumbow, 2009). Table 1 contrasts Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa in terms of the cultural dimensions of individualism and power distance. These three countries have the largest gross domestic products in Africa (World Population Review, 2023) and can therefore also be expected to have the largest number of businesses and other organizations. While the deficiencies of Hofstede's method of classifying national cultures are well documented (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2017), the table shows that the Individualism score for South Africa is twice as high as those of the other two countries and that the Power Distance score for the other two countries is almost twice as high as South Africa's. No single leadership style should be equally effective in all three of these countries.

Table 1

Individualism and Power Distance in Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa

Country	Individualism	Power Distance
Egypt	37	80
Nigeria	30	80
South Africa	65	49

Source: Hofstede Insights (2023)

On the other hand, we are not proposing that each of the fifty-four African countries is so unique that effective leadership in one country will never transfer to any other country. Instead, we suggest that there are clusters of countries in Africa within which similar leadership styles should succeed. In the next section of this paper, we explain how data collection should be conducted in order to identify groups of African countries that share optimal leadership styles, and in the following section we illustrate how the process would work by using data from an organizational leadership survey conducted within a university in The Gambia, a West African country about which we currently know very little in terms of how its employees want to be led.

3. Guidelines for Data Collection on Organizational Leadership in Africa

To identify clusters of African countries with similar optimal leadership styles, we believe that the same surveys should be conducted in multiple countries. The surveys should use five-point scales with response choices ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Within each country, the surveys should be collected from multiple organizations and there should be a roughly similar number of responses from each organization so that one organization does not dominate the results from that country.

As we shall demonstrate later in the paper, the frequency distributions of survey responses are much more informative than the means of survey responses. What is of particular interest is the modal, or most common response because that tells us whether each survey question should be retained, reverse scored, or dropped for an African country.

3.1 Modal responses of 4 or 5 on a five-point scale

When the modal response is 4 or 5 on a five-point leadership scale, this indicates a consensus on the part of respondents that the organizational leaders are engaging in a particular behavior. We can assume that this leadership behavior is desirable because the concept of organizational leadership implies the existence of formal organizations. Formal organizations offer stronger protections to employees than the informal labor market but in Africa, employment in formal organizations is rare (International Labour Organization, 2009) which means that formal organizations can be very selective when making hiring decisions. Therefore, we can expect that leaders of formal organizations in Africa highly value their employees and make good-faith efforts to lead them appropriately.

A modal response of 4 or 5 indicates that a particular question is relevant within an African country and should be retained for future leadership surveys in that country. However, we would not expect modal responses of 4 or 5 for every question in every country in Africa. This is because we would expect modal responses of 4 or 5 for every question if we administered these surveys throughout Western Europe and North America. Modal responses of 4 or 5 to every question would support those who argue that African leadership is not very different than Western leadership.

3.2 Modal responses of 1 or 2 on a five-point scale

When the modal response is 1 or 2 on a five-point leadership scale, this indicates a consensus on the part of respondents that the organizational leaders are not engaging in a particular behavior. We should not automatically assume that modal responses of 1 or 2 indicate dysfunctional leadership as they probably would in

leadership surveys conducted within the Western world. Instead, we should assume that a modal response of 1 or 2 reflects the preferences of respondents that their leaders should not engage in certain behaviors. For example, suppose the statement to which respondents indicated their level of agreement was "My supervisor always consults with me before making decisions that affect me." In a country with high power distance, such supervisory behaviors may be unwelcome and undesirable to subordinates in which case a lower score indicates more appropriate leadership behaviors in that context. A modal response of 1 or 2 indicates that a question is relevant for an African country and that it should be retained, but that the question should be reverse scored to reflect employee preferences.

3.3 Modal responses of 3 on a five-point scale

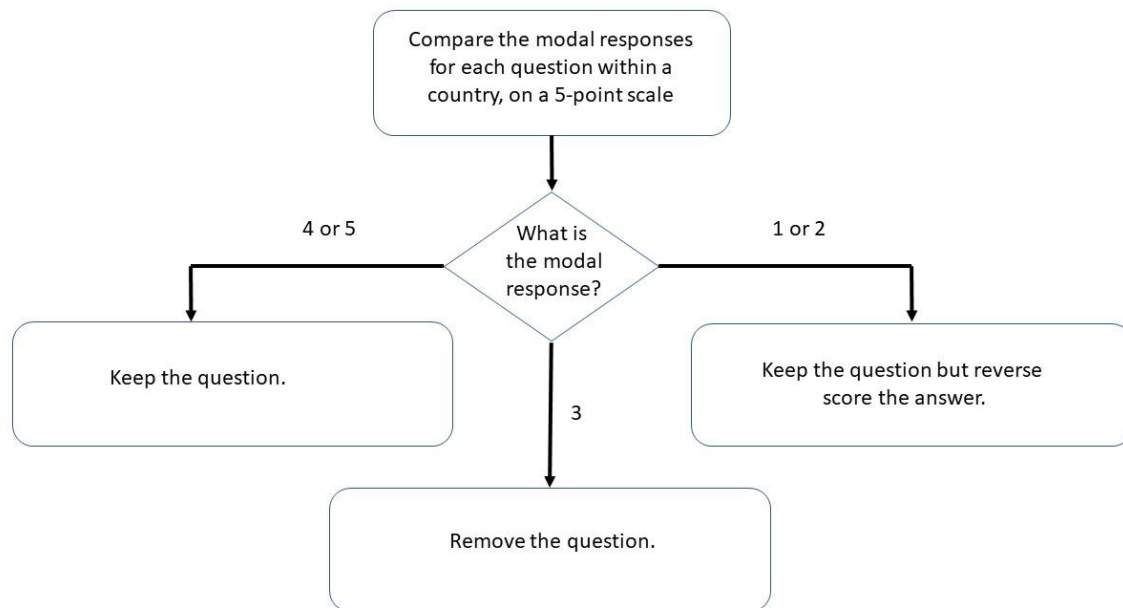
A modal response of 3 on a five-point scale of agreement corresponds to the "neutral" label. This probably does not mean that respondents have a neutral opinion about a particular leadership behavior. As Chyung, Roberts, Swanson, & Hankinson (2017) explain, responses of 3 on a five-point scale could also mean that respondents do not care about that topic, that they know too little about that topic, or that they think the correct answer depends on other factors that are not addressed in the question. If more respondents choose 3 than any other option, it is unlikely that they all truly hold neutral views. It is more likely that either they do not understand the question or that they do not perceive the question to be relevant. Questions for which the modal response is 3 should be removed from future surveys within an African country.

3.4 Clustering African countries based on modal survey responses

Figure 1 shows how we believe that organizational leadership survey questions should be customized for each African country. If there are no differences between African countries based on modal survey responses then a pan-African leadership style exists, but if the modal responses are not always 4 or 5 on a five-point scale then there are important differences between pan-African leadership and Western leadership. If there are differences between African countries based on modal survey responses, as we predict, then groups of African countries can be clustered together based on similarities of responses and a common leadership style can be identified that should be effective within each group. There are several statistical methods that can be used to identify similar groups of respondents, and they are collectively known as cluster analysis techniques (Frades & Matthiesen, 2010).

Figure 1

Recommended Dispositions for Organizational Leadership Survey Questions in African Countries



4. A Gambian example

4.1. The Gambia

The Gambia is the smallest country on the African mainland. It is in West Africa, bordered to the west by the Atlantic Ocean and to the north, east, and south by its much larger neighbor Senegal. The country faces many challenges including shortages of skilled labor and financial capital (Kah et al., 2022). There is very little published research on organizational leadership in this country. Murrell (1993) discussed the creation of a management development institute in the Gambia. Organizational development techniques were used in the creation of the institute which implies that Gambian managers are receptive to Western leadership styles. Chigudu et al. (2018) interviewed fifteen Gambian leaders in the health care sector and found that they cycled between authoritarian and democratic leadership styles. Hale (2014) proposed that there is a uniquely West African way of leadership although his description of it overlaps in many ways with Ubuntu leadership, for example he claims that West African leaders engage in community building and utilize participatory management styles.

4.2. Respondents

A leadership survey was administered in 2019 to employees of a university in The Gambia. The university is committed to community development (Mbah et al., 2022). Like African leadership studies in general as discussed previously, African educational leadership studies have been dominated by South African scholars studying South African educational leaders (Hallinger, 2018) so there is added value to any research that is conducted in other African countries. 119 employees completed the survey for a response rate of about 26%. To gain a more complete understanding of leadership in any African country we would want to survey employees of more than one organization, however the results of this study provide a useful illustration of our suggested process for identifying African countries with similar leadership strategies.

4.3. Leadership survey questions

We utilized two questions from the survey that indicated the level of agreement with the following statements: "The leadership of the university treats employee grievances fairly and justly", and "The leadership of the university provides training to develop its staff professionally." These are similar to questions that are commonly used in leadership studies and both of them could be administered throughout the continent as part of a larger survey to identify clusters of countries with similar leadership styles.

5. Results

5.1 Comparison of means

Table 2 compares the mean responses for the two survey questions. The difference in means is not statistically significant at the 10% level ($t = 1.41$) which implies that the responses to the two questions are fundamentally the same. This would be an incorrect conclusion, as we demonstrate in the next subsection where we compare the frequency distributions for the two questions. The difference in results for means versus frequencies illustrates the point we made previously which is that frequencies are more informative than means for the interpretation of organizational leadership surveys in Africa.

Table 2

Comparison of Means for Two Survey Questions in the Gambia (N = 119)

Statement	Mean response (standard deviation in parentheses)
The leadership of the university treats employee grievances fairly and justly	3.37 (0.85)
The leadership of the university provides training to develop its staff professionally	3.23 (0.71)

5.2 Comparison of frequencies

Table 3 shows the frequency distributions for the two survey questions. The difference in frequencies is statistically significant at the 10% level (Chi-squared = 10.68) which indicates that the responses to the two questions are different. The modal response for "The leadership of the university treats employee grievances fairly and justly" is 4 on the five-point scale whereas the modal response for "The leadership of the university provides training to develop its staff professionally," chosen by more than half of respondents, is 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Frequencies for Two Survey Questions in the Gambia

Response (N = 119)	The leadership of the university treats employee grievances fairly and justly	The leadership of the university provides training to develop its staff professionally
Strongly disagree	3	1
Disagree	13	13
Neutral	43	66
Agree	56	33
Strongly agree	4	3

6. Discussion

Following the procedures outlined in Figure 1 and assuming that these results would be replicated for other Gambian organizations, our recommendations would be to keep the first question and to discard the second question for future organizational leadership surveys in this country. It is surprising that the modal response, which was also the majority response, to "The leadership of the university provides training to develop its staff professionally" was 3 on a 5-point scale. It is unlikely that most of the respondents held truly neutral views on this subject because, as discussed previously, there are many reasons that a respondent would choose a response of 3 and only one of the reasons is neutrality. We can only speculate as to why this was the dominant response, but Chigudu et al. (2018) noted that resource scarcity was a major problem for Gambian health care leaders and that may also be true within the country's higher education sector. If so, then respondents may have chosen the neutral response because they felt that lack of resources made it impossible for the leadership of the university to provide training, and that a response of 1 or 2 would be unfair to the university leadership as it would seem like the leadership were being blamed for a problem that was beyond their control.

It is encouraging that the modal response to “The leadership of the university treats employee grievances fairly and justly” was 4 on a five-point scale and that a majority of respondents chose responses of 4 or 5. Were this result to be replicated in other workplaces in The Gambia, this would suggest that Gambian employees feel that they deserve workplace justice and that they generally feel that they are receiving workplace justice. The neutral response was still a popular choice but for this statement it may have been because a respondent did not have a grievance and therefore did not have an opinion as to whether grievances were treated fairly and justly by the leadership of the university.

Our results, although tentative because they come from a single employer in a single African country, show the value of conducting organizational leadership surveys in multiple African countries and then comparing the frequency distributions of responses to each question within each country. African leadership research appears to be following a deductive model in which theories of leadership are developed and then tested. Although we support the goal of Africanizing leadership theories for use in African organizations, we recommend an inductive model in which surveys are distributed throughout the continent and then differences between countries in survey response frequencies are used to construct African leadership theories. We believe that the goal of a pan-African leadership theory is unattainable and that our recommended research approach would more quickly lead to the development of leadership theories for clusters of African countries that yield similar modal responses to the organizational leadership survey questions.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research and Practice

Our research has several limitations. We only collected data from one organization in one African country, our results predate COVID so they may no longer reflect the sentiments of Gambian employees, and we were unable to conduct a follow-up study to see why so many respondents chose 3 on the five-point scale. However, we believe that our research adds to the body of knowledge of African leadership theory because we know so little about organizational leadership in the Gambia. More importantly, we hope to steer African organizational leadership researchers away from the Quixotic goal of creating and testing a pan-African leadership theory and toward the more fruitful aim of identifying clusters of African countries within which the same leadership styles can be effective.

Future research directions abound. For example, Africa is not the only continent about which we know too little when it comes to organizational leadership. Our research design could be equally effective in other continents such as South America which also need to reclaim their cultural identities from European imperialism. Within Africa, it may

not always be the case that the country is the most appropriate level of analysis. Within larger and more diverse African countries there may be regional differences that, if ignored, could lead to incorrect conclusions about how best to lead organizations.

A major issue with organizational leadership theory in the African context is that it applies best within traditional employment settings, yet most Africans do not enjoy the benefits of formal employment relationships. If we want to extend the benefits of our research beyond those Africans who are privileged to have jobs in organizations, we need to find ways of adapting leadership surveys so that they are meaningful to those who earn their money within the continent's vast informal employment sector.

Our main implication for practice is that African organizations should avoid interpreting organizational leadership surveys in the same ways as if they were in North America or Western Europe. Not every organizational leadership survey question used in the Western world will be applicable throughout Africa and higher responses on the traditional five-point scale will not always be preferable to lower responses for every question. European and North American consultants are paid to spread Western business practices throughout the rest of the world (Boussebaa, 2015), but African organizations need to find their own solutions. Copying what is done elsewhere would undermine the worthwhile projects of reclaiming African business philosophies and indigenizing African organizational leadership theory and practice.

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