

Ubuntu Leadership in Organisational Contexts: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Further Research

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates how Ubuntu leadership has been portrayed within organisational contexts using a systematic literature review methodology to synthesise the literature in a thorough and transparent manner.

Design/methodology/approach: A computerised search of eight databases was conducted for peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical studies within organisational contexts, published from 1994 over a 25-year period, using the keywords “Ubuntu,” “African,” “Afrocentric,” “relational leadership or management,” and “cultural leadership or management in Africa.” A decision tree was applied revealing 74 articles for review, classification, and analysis.

Findings: Results reveal a lack of robust empirical studies while academic interest in Ubuntu leadership within organisational contexts is growing. In addition, researchers are calling for blended leadership approaches in Africa given that Ubuntu leadership within organisational contexts is regarded as relational, participatory, and values-based.

Research implications: This article contributes to the development of organisational Ubuntu leadership theory and practice as well as providing further direction for developing this leadership construct through a clearer picture of the state of this field of research.

Originality/value: The study offers a unique systematic review of literature on Ubuntu in organisational leadership contexts over a 25-year period, providing a robust foundation and roadmap to extend Ubuntu leadership theory.

Keywords: African leadership; Afrocentric leadership; Ubuntu leadership; organisational Ubuntu

Introduction

Effective leadership and managerial practices are culturally contingent, and management principles may need to embrace cultural nuances (Mangaliso et al. 2021; Zondo 2022). Ubuntu is generally considered to be a unique Afrocentric approach to leading and managing, which captures the essence of what it means to be human by focusing on people and their dignity (Bolden and Kirk 2009; Penceliah and Mathe 2007; Walumbwa et al. 2011; Zondo 2022). In addition, Africans aspire for participative leadership founded on humanistic principles that value individual differences, authenticity, and serving the community (Bolden and Kirk 2009; Karsten and Illa 2005). Ubuntu within organisational contexts has been a subject of increasing interest leading up to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 and beyond. In literature, there is consensus that further conceptualisation of Afrocentric leadership, specifically the precise nature of Ubuntu within organisational contexts, is required (Brubaker 2013; Grobler and Singh 2018; Tauetsile 2021). This, therefore, necessitates studies on the nature of the Ubuntu philosophy and how this unique Afrocentric approach influences leadership and management, helping future leaders (from Africa and abroad) understand the phenomenon in its multifaceted dimensions.

Literature Review

The Ubuntu Philosophy

In the academic discourse on Ubuntu within organisational contexts, there is broad agreement on the descriptions provided by researchers Mangaliso (2001), Mbigi (1997), and Mbigi and Maree (2005). Mbigi (1997) and Mbigi and Maree (2005) suggest that Ubuntu is best expressed by the isiXhosa proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning “I am because we are.” Mbigi and Maree (2005) further identify five key values that underpin Ubuntu: survival, compassion, solidarity, dignity, and respect. Similarly, Mangaliso (2001, 24) defines Ubuntu as “humaneness, a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another.” Recent literature agrees with these seminal perspectives, suggesting that relationality, humaneness, caring, and communal relationships are core features of Ubuntu (Grobler and Koen 2024; Tauetsile 2021; Zondo 2022).

Ubuntu Within an Organisational Context

Influential authors Mbigi (1997), Mbigi and Maree (2005), and Mangaliso (2001) insist that Ubuntu has a place within an organisational context. Mbigi (1997) suggests that collective solidarity in African life should be expressed in modern forms of business entrepreneurship, organisations, and management to build a competitive, developed nation and its institutions. Mangaliso (2001) agrees with Mbigi's perspective and argues that Ubuntu can provide a competitive advantage to companies that incorporate its principles and practices. Mbigi and Maree (2005) suggest that it is important to build

on indigenous cultural practices and the positive contributions of all cultures. More recently, Molose et al. (2019, 8) contend that if managers understand Ubuntu values and practices—namely compassion, survival, group solidarity, respect, dignity, and collectivism—they could foster a positive and motivational atmosphere among their teams. Mangaliso et al. (2021, 17) state that the “philosophy of Ubuntu offers great potential for enlightening organisations about the African worldview,” and that to manage effectively in Africa, one needs to harmonise traditional corporate practices with those that are appropriate in the African context. Zondo (2022, 130) corroborates these perspectives and suggests the “practices of Ubuntu with regard to humanity, care, sharing, teamwork spirit, compassion, dignity, consensus decision-making systems, and respect for the environment are all positive elements that could make a contribution towards the improvement of corporate performance.”

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to investigate how Ubuntu leadership has been portrayed in organisational contexts through its reporting in the literature. The review aims to provide further direction for developing the construct through a rigorous and evidence-informed systematic literature review covering a 25-year period.

Method

Research Design

Both researchers recognise that their social, cultural, and personal identities influence their perspectives. To minimise subjectivity, a systematic literature review was selected as the research methodology to effectively address positionality by reducing researcher bias through a rigorous, replicable approach that limits personal subjectivity compared to narrative or traditional literature reviews. It achieves this through structured processes that emphasise transparency, consistency, and objectivity. This process is based on a structured and replicable approach following established systematic literature review protocols (Higgins et al. 2019; Page et al. 2021). Additionally, for management studies, a more flexible approach was suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003), where the researcher clearly defines the intentions of the systematic review and can modify the plan during the review, as long as explanations are provided. This enables a protocol that does not compromise creativity during the review process while being less susceptible to researcher bias.

Data Collection

To identify publications for inclusion in the review, a time frame from 1994 to the end of June 2019 was chosen, as research into the role of Ubuntu leadership within South African organisations gained momentum after the first democratic elections in 1994. Further selection criteria included published, peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical studies within an organisational context. Critical reviews and essays are regarded as theoretical studies, while qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies are considered empirical studies. A computerised search of eight databases was conducted

by the researchers to increase the likelihood that studies meeting the inclusion criteria would be located. The databases included Wiley Online Journals, Taylor and Francis Online Journals, Emerald Journals, SAGE Journals Online, EBSCO (Business Source Ultimate, Academic Search Ultimate, Masterfile Premier, and PsychArticles), SAE Publications, Science Direct, and ProQuest (ABI/Inform). Search terms included: Ubuntu leadership or management; Afrocentric leadership or management; African leadership or management; relational leadership or management; cultural leadership and Africa; and cultural management and Africa.

A decision tree was applied to identify articles for inclusion in the review, as shown in Figure 1. The results revealed 74 articles for review, classification, and analysis. These articles were in an organisational context and contained Ubuntu leadership/management or African leadership/management in the title, keywords, abstract, or body of the article, or there was a direct reference to or explanation of Ubuntu within the article.

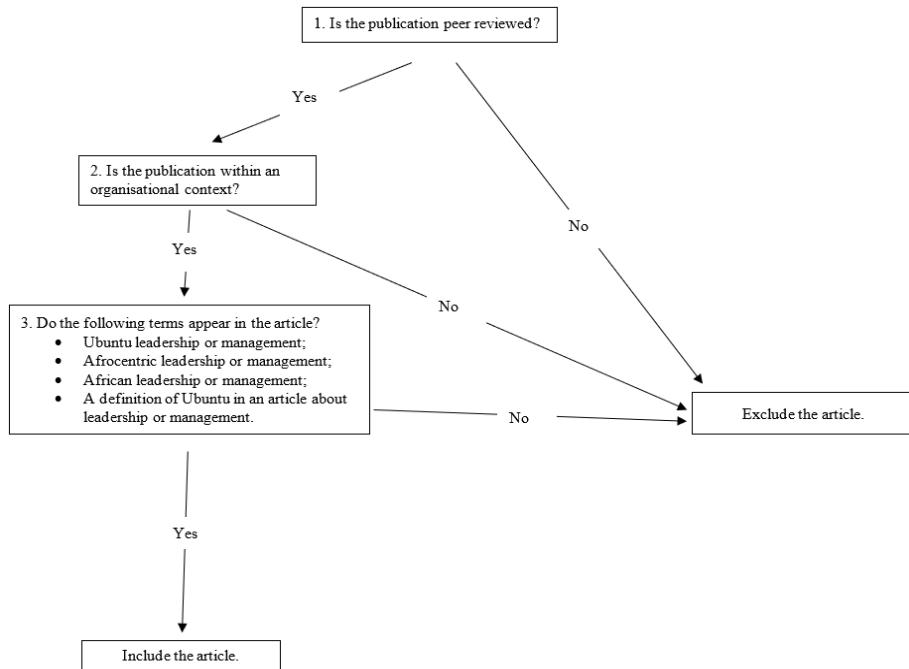


Figure 1: Systematic literature review decision tree

Content Analysis

To ensure quality and rigour when analysing the data, a combination of methods described by Dinh et al. (2014), Gardner et al. (2010), Gardner et al. (2011), and Scandura and Williams (2000) was applied. These methods were chosen because the authors had previously conducted systematic literature reviews on leadership and management. Based on similar studies, specific dimensions informed the content analysis and were compiled. These dimensions were: year of publication, author name,

institutional affiliation, country where the research was conducted, title of the article, journal, keywords, publication type, purpose of the article, author's research paradigm, methodology, and population. Qualitative studies were coded as follows: method of data collection, data analysis techniques, sample details, and whether trustworthiness was addressed. Quantitative studies were coded using the following criteria: method of data collection, data analysis techniques, sample details, and the provision of reliability estimates. For greater insight and theme identification, additional categories were included: Is Ubuntu or African leadership discussed or defined in the article? How is Ubuntu explained or defined? What is the theoretical foundation of Ubuntu leadership? In line with Tranfield et al.'s (2003) suggestion, some of the initial categories were adjusted or excluded to reflect the information available in the articles selected for inclusion in the review. For the sake of clarity in the discussions that follow, the term "Ubuntu leadership" includes Ubuntu management, African leadership or management, and Afrocentric leadership or management.

Results

Key Findings on Ubuntu Leadership in Organisational Contexts over 25 Years

Tables 1 to 4 report the publication type, institutional affiliation of the authors, journal, and the study purpose by period for both theoretical and empirical publications.

Table 1: Publication type by period for all publications

Publication type	Period					Total
	1994– 1999	2000– 2004	2005– 2009	2010– 2014	2015– 2019	
Theoretical	2	4	10	10	8	34
Empirical						
Qualitative	1	1	5	9	8	24
Quantitative		1	2	4	4	11
Mixed	1	1		1	2	5
Total	4	7	17	24	22	74

Table 1 indicates that interest in organisational Ubuntu leadership has gained momentum and authors are responding to the call for more empirical studies within this field. All categories showed a marked increase from 2005 onwards, with the first 15 years yielding 28 publications and the following decade yielding 46 publications. The empirical studies showed a marked increase from 12 studies in the first 15 years to 28 studies in the last decade. Additionally, the data revealed the institutional affiliations of the theoretical and empirical publications, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Institutional affiliation of author/s by period for theoretical and empirical publications

Institutional affiliation	Country	Period					Total
		1994– 1999	2000– 2004	2005– 2009	2010– 2014	2015– 2019	
Individual institutions in Africa							
Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership	SA		1			2	3
University of Pretoria	SA				1	1	2
Unisa	SA		1		2	2	5
University of Johannesburg	SA				3	1	4
University of KwaZulu-Natal	SA			1	1	1	3
Nelson Mandela University	SA			1		1	2
University of Stellenbosch	SA			1	1		2
Other South African universities	SA			3	3	1	7
Other African universities	Various			3	1	1	5
Total		0	2	9	12	10	33
Individual institutions abroad							
Universities based in the USA	USA			1	3	2	6
Universities based in the UK	UK	2	1		2	2	7
Other universities abroad	Various		1	1	1	1	4
Total		2	2	2	6	5	17
Combined institutions: Africa							
Combined institutions in South Africa	SA				2	1	3
Combined institutions in Malawi and South Africa	Malawi and SA				2		2
Other combined institutions	Various	1		1			2
Total		1	0	1	4	1	7
Combined institutions: Africa and abroad							
Universities between South Africa and USA	USA and SA	1	1	1			3
Universities between	Australia			1	1		2

South Africa and Australia	and SA					
Other combined institutions	Various		1	1	3	5
Total		1	1	3	2	3
Combined institutions: abroad						
University of Exeter and University of West of England	UK		1			1
Combined institutions: USA	USA	1	1		1	3
Total		0	1	2	0	1
Institutional affiliation unclear			1		2	3
Total						74

Note: SA: South Africa; UK: United Kingdom; USA: United States of America

The first category, Individual Institutions in Africa, yielded 11 publications within the first 15 years and 22 publications within the last decade, with the first two publications coming from the Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership and Unisa between 2000 and 2004. Unisa yielded the highest number of publications (five) over the period, followed by the University of Johannesburg (four), Unisa Graduate School of Business (three), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (three), as well as the universities of Pretoria, Nelson Mandela, and Stellenbosch (two). The institutions included in “other South African universities” and “other African universities” each yielded one publication.

The second category, Individual Institutions Abroad, yielded six publications from the USA, seven from the UK, and the rest from Canada, Australia, Germany, and Croatia. This category yielded six publications within the first 15 years and 11 in the last decade.

In the third category, Combined Institutions: Africa, there were three collaborations between institutions in South Africa, two between institutions in Malawi and South Africa, one between Malawi, Uganda, and Botswana, and one between South Africa, Kenya, and Botswana. Only two collaborations occurred within the first 15 years, while the remaining collaborations took place in the last decade.

The fourth category, Combined Institutions: Africa and Abroad, yielded three collaborations between institutions in the USA and South Africa, and two between Australia and South Africa. The remaining collaborations were between Canada and South Africa, the UK and Ghana, the Netherlands and West Africa, Ethiopia and Belgium, and Germany and South Africa.

The results of category five, Combined Institutions: Abroad, yielded three collaborations between institutions in the USA and one in the UK. Three occurred during the first 15 years, and one occurred within the last decade.

Three publications, in which the institutional affiliation is unclear, fell into the sixth category. Institutions in Africa were represented in 50 out of the 74 publications (68%). Data also showed which journals published theoretical and empirical articles during the period, shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Journal by period for theoretical and empirical publications

Journals	Period					Total
	1994– 1999	2000– 2004	2005– 2009	2010– 2014	2015– 2019	
<i>Journal of Contemporary Management</i>			2		2	4
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>		1	1	1		3
<i>Journal of Public Administration</i>			2	1		3
<i>International Journal of Cross Cultural Management</i>			2			2
<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	1	1				2
<i>The Journal of Leadership Studies</i>			1		1	2
<i>Leadership and Organisational Development Journal</i>	1	1				2
<i>Educational Management Administration and Leadership</i>				1	1	2
<i>Human Resource Development International</i>			1	1		2
<i>Management Decision</i>	1	1				2
<i>SA Journal of Human Resource Management</i>				1	1	2
<i>INDILINGA - African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems</i>				2		2
<i>Indigenous Management Practices in Africa</i>					2	2
Other journals	2	2	8	16	16	44
Total	4	7	17	24	22	74

The *Journal of Contemporary Management*, a South Africa-based journal, yielded four publications; the *Journal of Business Ethics*, an international journal, yielded three

publications; and the *Journal of Public Administration*, a South Africa-based journal, yielded three publications. Ten journals yielded two articles each—seven are international journals, and three are based in Africa. The remaining 44 journals yielded one article each. Furthermore, the data indicated the study purposes for the theoretical and empirical publications over the period, shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Study purpose by period for theoretical and empirical publications

Study purpose	Period					Total
	1994– 1999	2000– 2004	2005– 2009	2010– 2014	2015– 2019	
Develop new theory	2	3	7	13	14	39
Review existing theory	1	3	10	8	7	29
Critique existing theory	1	1		3	1	6
Total	4	7	17	24	22	74

The precise nature of Ubuntu in organisational contexts has been presented using various explanations in the literature. Authors have focused on developing and reviewing the theory in this field rather than empirically testing it. Three categories emerged: developing new theory (39 articles), reviewing existing theory (29 articles), and critiquing existing theory (6 articles). Twelve publications aimed at developing new theory during the first 15 years, followed by a sharp increase in the last decade to 27 publications. The review of existing theory rose from 2005 to 2009 but then tapered off during the last decade. A limited number of critiques have emerged, indicating that authors are beginning to critically evaluate and argue the concept of Ubuntu leadership within an organisational context.

Tables 5 to 7 focus on empirical publications. Table 5 outlines whether the authors of the empirical articles stated their epistemological assumptions across the period; Table 6 illustrates sample location, sample type, sampling method, and time frame used; and Table 7 indicates the analytical methods by period for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies.

Table 5: Stated epistemological assumptions for empirical studies

Empirical studies	Not stated	%	Stated by period					Total
			1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	
Qualitative studies	13	54			1	4	6	11
Quantitative studies	6	55				1	4	5
Mixed method studies	3	60					2	2
Total	22		0	0	1	5	12	18

Data were generated by searching each article for “epistemology,” “paradigm,” or “approach.” Of the 40 empirical articles, 18 authors clearly stated their epistemological assumptions, while 22 did not. There has, however, been an improvement in the inclusion of this information in publications since 2005. Author epistemologies in qualitative studies included an inductive approach (Bolden and Kirk 2009); a two-way theory-practice iterative approach (Geldenhuys and Veldsman 2011); a qualitative research paradigm (Naicker 2015; Naidoo and Perumal 2014); an emic approach (Nkomo and Kriek 2011); an interventionist empirical approach (Puplampu 2010); a discursive approach (Karikari and Brown 2018); a phenomenological paradigm (Ngunjiri 2016; Steenkamp and Rensburg 2018); an ethnographic approach (Setlhodi 2019); and a social constructivist perspective (Mayer et al. 2018). Author epistemologies in quantitative studies included an interactive approach (Eustace and Martins 2014); a positivist approach (Mabasa and Eresia-Eke 2018; Muller et al. 2019); an empirical paradigm and etic approach (Grobler and Singh 2018); and an empirical paradigm (Grobler et al. 2019). The mixed method studies revealed Q methodology and grounded theory (Mitiku et al. 2017), as well as positivist approaches (Bagire et al. 2015). West (2014) clearly outlined his epistemological assumptions underlying his critique of existing theory by stating what would constitute evidence and what would not. Another observation is that Ubuntu was described as an epistemology in 48 of the articles. Additionally, the data revealed the sample location, sample type, sample method, and time frame of the study, as shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Sample location, sample type, sampling method, and time frame for empirical studies

Sample location	Qual	Quant	Mixed	Total
Sub-Saharan Africa	2	1		3
South Africa	11	10	2	23
Zambia	1			1
Malawi	1		1	2
Democratic Republic of Congo	1			1
Ethiopia			1	1
Tanzania	1			1
Kenya	1			1
Ghana	1		1	2
Botswana	2			2
Cameroon and South Africa	1			1
USA	1			1
Unclear	1			1
Sample type	Qual	Quant	Mixed	Total
Private sector	5	4	1	10
Public sector		1	1	2
Mixed (private and public sectors)	3	3	3	9
Student	1	2		3
Leadership programme	1			1
Community leaders	1			1
School context	6	1		7
Women leaders	1			1
Org leaders	1			1
Non-profit/NGO	2			2
Unclear	3			3
Sampling method	Qual	Quant	Mixed	Total
Convenience		4	1	5
Random		2	2	4
Purposive	4	1		5
Purposive stratified	1			1
Purposive snowball	2			2
Purposive convenience	1			1
Theoretical approach	1			1
Not stated	15	4	2	21

Time frame	Qual	Quant	Mixed	Total
Cross-sectional	0	6	1	7
Not stated	0	5	4	9

Sample location data revealed that most samples consist of participants from South Africa. This was followed by sub-Saharan Africa, along with Malawi, Ghana, and Botswana. The remaining samples were from various locations in Africa. One sample was from the USA, while the location of the other sample was unclear. Regarding sample type, most samples were drawn from the private sector, followed by mixed contexts, school contexts, students, the public sector, non-profit organisations or NGOs, participants from leadership programmes, community leaders, women leaders, and organisational leaders. The sample type was unclear in three studies. The sampling method was unclear in half of the publications. Of those mentioned, convenience and purposive sampling were the most common, followed by random and purposive snowball sampling. The remaining methods included purposive stratified, purposive convenience, and a theoretical approach. Qualitative studies favoured purposive, purposive stratified, purposive convenience, and a theoretical approach, while quantitative and mixed methods favoured convenience, random, and purposive sampling methods. In over half of the quantitative and mixed studies, the time frame was not stated, while the remaining studies favoured a cross-sectional design. None of the publications utilised a longitudinal design. Furthermore, Table 7 categorises the analytical methods used for the empirical studies.

Table 7: Analytical methods by period for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies

Qualitative data collection	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	Total
Interviews		1	5	7	3	16
Participant observation			2		2	4
Questionnaires	1	1	1	1		4
Community visits			1			1
Focus groups				1	3	4
Expert reviews				1		1
Narratives/life stories				3	2	5
Case study		1	1			2
Archival material			1	2	1	4
Research journal					1	1
Grounded theory			1			1
Ethnography					1	1

Qualitative data analysis	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	Total
Thematic analysis			3	5	3	11
Content analysis			1		2	3
Discourse analysis				1	2	3
Appreciative enquiry			1	1		2
Triangulation			1		1	2
Discussion of validity/reliability	1		1	1	1	4
Quantitative data collection	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	Total
Survey		1	2	3	4	10
Scale development					2	2
Secondary data				1		1
Quantitative data analysis	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	Total
Descriptive statistics		1	1	4	3	9
ANOVA/MANOVA		2	1	1		4
Factor analysis				4	4	8
Pearson's chi-squared			1			1
Sem				2		2
Aggregate rank analysis				1		1
Model fit					1	1
Convergent validity					1	1
Regression					2	2
Reliability estimates	1		2		3	6
Qualitative methods used in mixed method studies	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	Total
Focus group	1	1				2
Interview		1		1	1	3
Questionnaire				1		1
Participant observation					1	1
Thematic analysis					1	1

Quantitative methods used in mixed method studies	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	Total
Survey	1	1		1	1	4
Reliability		1		1	1	3
Descriptives		1		1		2
Factor analysis		1		1		2
<i>t</i> -tests		1				1
Regression					1	1
Correlation					1	1
Q methodology					1	1

Qualitative data collection methods favoured interviews, followed by narratives/life stories, participant observation, questionnaires, focus groups, and archival material. The most common qualitative data analysis approaches are thematic analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, and appreciative inquiry. Triangulation was mentioned in two of the publications, while validity and reliability aspects were discussed in four of the publications.

Quantitative studies favoured surveys, with two of the articles developing a scale and one article using secondary data. Studies developing a scale include Grobler and Singh (2018), who reviewed and validated the characteristics underpinning Afrocentric leadership using an existing (Western) leadership taxonomy, and Grobler et al. (2019), who validated the human resources practices perceptions questionnaire in a Southern African context while considering contextual realities such as collectivism embedded in Ubuntu and Afrocentrism. Of the data analysis methods chosen, descriptive statistics were the most common. This was followed by factor analysis, reliability estimates, ANOVA/MANOVA, SEM, and regression.

When investigating the analytical methods used in the five mixed method studies, it was found that interviews (in three studies) and focus groups (in two studies) were the most common qualitative methods. This was followed by questionnaires, participant observation, and thematic analysis. Common quantitative methods included surveys (four studies), reliability analysis (three studies), descriptive statistics (two studies), factor analysis (two studies), and finally *t*-tests, regression, correlation, and Q methodology (one study each). The study using Q methodology examined the leadership roles that Ethiopian civil service managers preferably embody in their environment (Mitiku et al. 2017).

The data presented in tables 1–7 reveal five key findings regarding how Ubuntu has been portrayed in organisational contexts.

Key Findings Emerging out of the Systematic Literature Review

Finding 1: Academic interest in Ubuntu leadership within an organisational context has gained momentum over the last 25 years, and authors are beginning to respond to the call for more empirical studies in this field.

Finding 2: The majority of the authors were affiliated with African institutions.

Finding 3: Of the three journals yielding the highest number of publications, two are based in Africa, and one is an international journal.

Finding 4: Over the past 25 years, authors have focused on developing and reviewing Ubuntu leadership theory rather than empirically testing it.

Finding 5: There are several indications of a lack of robust empirical studies:

1. In over half of the empirical studies, the author's epistemological assumptions are not clearly stated.
2. Sampling methods are unclear in over half of the empirical publications.
3. The study time frame was not clearly stated in more than half of the quantitative and mixed method studies.
4. Validity and reliability were addressed in four of the qualitative studies.
5. Of the 10 quantitative surveys, reliability estimates were provided in only six of the studies.
6. There was a lack of advanced data analysis techniques used in the quantitative and mixed method studies.

Additionally, five key themes emerged from coding for further categories. These themes ranged from the key influencers in Ubuntu leadership literature to the calls made by researchers.

Key Themes on Ubuntu Leadership in Organisational Contexts Over the 25-year Period

Theme One: Lovemore Mbigi is a Key Influencer Within the Academic Discourse on Ubuntu Leadership Within an Organisational Context

Table 8 illustrates the key influencers and topic leaders in Ubuntu leadership literature.

Table 8: Ubuntu leadership influencers and topic leaders

Researcher	Referenced year of publication	No. of publications
Broodryk	2005, 2007	8
Desmond Tutu	1999	8
Khoza	1993, 1994, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2012	12
Mangaliso	2001	10
Mbigi	1995, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2005	20
Mbigi and Maree	1995, 2005	15
Mbiti	1969, 1989, 1991	7

The results of coding the number of times a specific reference appeared in an article regarding how Ubuntu/African leadership was explained or defined are shown in Table 8. Lovemore Mbigi is the key influencer and topic leader, as his work from 1995 to 2005 is referenced 20 times. Mbigi and Maree's 1995/2005 book entitled *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management*, is referenced 15 times; Dr Reuel Khoza, an applied author and former Nedbank Chairman, is referenced 12 times; Mzamo Mangaliso's 2001 article entitled "Building competitive advantage from Ubuntu: Management lessons from South Africa" is referenced 10 times; Desmond Tutu, South African Anglican cleric and theologian, is referenced eight times; Dr Johann Broodryk, the first person to obtain a doctorate on the philosophy of Ubuntu, is referenced eight times; and, Mbiti's work is referenced seven times.

A second theme emerged from coding the theoretical foundations of Ubuntu across publication types, as illustrated in Table 9.

Theme Two: Ubuntu Within Organisational Contexts is Mostly Regarded as a Relational Concept

Table 9: Conceptual foundations of Ubuntu across publication type

Conceptual foundations	Publication type				Total	%
	Theoretical	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed		
As a cultural concept			1	1	2	3
As a relational concept	24	21	8	5	58	77
As a cultural and relational concept	8	2	2		12	16

Conceptual foundations	Publication type				Total	%
	Theoretical	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed		
As an ethical philosophy	3				3	4

The underlying theoretical foundations of Ubuntu, across different publication types, were coded, revealing four conceptual foundations. The most common references were to Ubuntu as a relational concept, with articles using “I am because we are” or the *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* proverb, as well as similar variations. Additionally, referring to Ubuntu as a humanistic philosophy or social practice, and using terms like “values-based,” “servant,” or “relational,” supported this conceptualisation. Less common were articles describing Ubuntu through the lens of collectivism and referencing Hofstede’s (1984) cultural framework, which were regarded as supportive of a cultural foundation. Explanations of Ubuntu that employed a cultural and relational lens were categorised in the third category, while explanations of Ubuntu as an ethical philosophy were placed in the fourth category.

Additionally, a third theme emerged regarding the conceptualisation of Ubuntu as a management style.

Theme Three: There is Agreement that Ubuntu Could Be Conceptualised as a Leadership or Management Style

Literature was coded using the terms Ubuntu, African, and Afrocentric leadership or management. An example of a theoretical publication is by Nwagbara (2011), who calls for an African-centred organisational leadership paradigm where Africa’s indigenous management practices are rooted in Ubuntu. A qualitative publication by Geldenhuys and Veldsman (2011) refers to elements of Ubuntu leadership as teamwork, inclusive participation, sacrificing personal gain for the group and the benefit of the community, openness, transparency, consensus in decision-making, and structure through rituals and ceremonies. Grobler and Singh (2018) published a quantitative study that revealed that, although some leadership behaviours are generic, there are unique Afrocentric leadership behaviours with a participatory, democratic, and communalistic focus. Similarly, literature describing Ubuntu as a philosophy that informs leadership and management has emerged. A theoretical publication by Mamman and Zakaria (2016) argued for the integration of Ubuntu philosophy and its principles into the development of organisations and their members. Geldenhuys and Veldsman (2011) published a qualitative study that aimed to develop a robust and holistic strategic management tool by examining scenario based planning and organisational change navigation within an Afrocentric context. A quantitative study by Khomba et al. (2011) aimed to redesign the innovation perspective of the Balanced Scorecard model and to suggest a new management approach for organisations in Africa. The empirical results revealed that this would be an ideal approach within an African organisation.

The literature also revealed agreement on how Ubuntu-related leadership is described, as shown in Theme Four.

Theme Four: Ubuntu-Related Leadership Can Be Described as Participatory and Values-Based

Literature supporting this theme was identified using terms such as participatory, collaborative, collective, inclusive, consensus, and democratic. In their theoretical publication, Iwowo (2015) refers to empathetic leadership, collective responsibility, and interactive leadership. A qualitative study by Elonga Mboy (2019) described Ubuntu as communalism—an African sense of community, interdependence, and care resembling Western participative approaches to leadership. Shrivastava et al. (2014) authored a quantitative study that showed the ability to communicate inclusively with a diverse workforce is critical for South African managers. In addition, literature referring to Ubuntu leadership as values-based was coded. A theoretical publication by Bertsch (2012) suggested that for a cultural shift in American-based leadership practices to take place, a values-based leadership style like Ubuntu would need to be embraced. Mogadime et al. (2010) published a qualitative study that found spirituality, interdependence, and unity—three values of Ubuntu—embedded in the participants' narratives. Shrivastava et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study examining how Ubuntu might manifest in the South African workplace from a values-based perspective. Similarly, literature on the Ubuntu philosophy that informs business and personal ethics was coded. A theoretical publication by Sebola (2014) concluded that there is a need to harmonise legislation governing ethics with the generally accepted cultural values and practices of South Africans. Mayer et al. (2018) published a qualitative study suggesting that women leaders focus on inner resources (moral, spiritual, and ethical) rather than on behavioural leadership traits when dealing with conflict. This points to spiritual or ethical leadership and a strong moral compass.

The final theme revealed some agreement among authors calling for blended leadership in Africa.

Theme Five: Researchers Are Calling for Blended Leadership Approaches in Africa

This theme was identified through a review of literature calling for a blend of Afrocentric and Eurocentric leadership. A theoretical publication authored by Penceliah and Mathe (2007) examined good practices and lessons in both Afrocentric and Eurocentric leadership and called for a creative synergy between the two styles. In addition, literature calling for a blend of instrumental versus humanistic, pragmatic versus transformative, autocratic versus relational, and classical versus indigenous was evident. In a theoretical publication, Naidoo (2005) proposes a hybrid leadership and governance framework based on values, ethics, collective decision-making, listening skills, and dialogue that is pragmatic and transformative. Naidoo and Perumal (2014) authored a qualitative study that found women school principals subscribed to a relational, inclusive, and compassionate leadership style, in addition to an autocratic

leadership style, to ensure the effective and efficient management of their schools. In a mixed method study, Jackson (1999) calls for policies to reconcile the instrumental and humanistic orientations of people using an indigenous management style based on Western, Asian, and African values.

The systematic literature review concluded in June 2019. The discussion that follows considers the state of the literature since then and if researchers have been responding to the calls for further empirical studies

Discussion

Since June 2019, authors have responded to the call for more empirical studies. Theoretical conceptualisations of Ubuntu have been proposed by Molose et al. (2019) and Lerutla and Steyn (2021). Both studies used literature and interviews to inform their conceptualisation and measurement instruments, and the research design and sampling methods were clearly explained. Furthermore, Lerutla and Steyn (2021) explained their epistemology and addressed the reliability aspects of developing their instrument. Sachikonye and Ramlogan (2024) proposed a meta-theory of Ubuntu that seeks to explain how the nature of responsibility in African settings differs from that in Western settings, and discusses the key concepts of responsible leadership through the lens of Ubuntu.

Furthermore, Sibanda and Grobler (2023) proposed a conceptualisation of spiritual leadership within the context of African management philosophies that embraces the elements of Ubuntu and *batho pele*. Similarly, Grobler and Koen (2024) proposed a conceptualisation of responsible leadership in South Africa and suggested that, in Africa and South Africa, the dominant leadership philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises relationships, participative decision-making, and concern for group welfare, is complementary to the values and behaviours of responsible leadership. In both of these studies, the research design, methodology, and sample size are clearly explained.

Evans et al. (2021) examined the leadership preferences of working adults in Ghana, Kenya, and Zambia using the Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire XII (LBDQXII), a theoretical model of explicit leader behaviour. The aim was to stimulate interest in understanding effective leadership practices on the African continent. Results revealed a strong need for more in-depth studies of leadership theory in the African context, particularly across countries. Lerutla and Steyn (2022) assessed whether the leadership styles of South African leaders differed based on their cultural backgrounds and whether the effectiveness of these leadership styles was judged differently by their subordinates. The survey demonstrated good reliability within the context of the study, and the findings revealed that leaders in South Africa, regardless of their cultural background, exhibit similar behavioural attributes. In addition, Grobler and Sibanda (2024) developed and tested an 18 item spiritual leadership scale within a South African organisational context. In these studies, the research methodology was clearly

explained, the reliability and validity aspects were addressed, and more advanced statistical techniques were employed. Furthermore, there are publications confirming the relevance of the five themes identified in the systematic literature review. Lovemore Mbigi is referenced (Zondo 2022). Ubuntu is referred to as a relational, participatory, and values-based concept, as well as a leadership or management style (Evans et al. 2021; Mangaliso et al. 2021; Chetty and Price 2024). Additionally, Osa (2019) called for a culture and values-based model of blended leadership.

At this juncture, it is important to consider the limitations of the study.

Limitations

Despite efforts to review the literature in a thorough, rigorous, and evidence-informed manner, it is possible that some studies meeting the inclusion criteria were not identified. In addition, applied management articles, as well as unpublished reports and theses, were not considered or included in the sample used for content analysis. Lastly, despite using a combination of methods from previous systematic literature reviews to conduct the data analysis, some of the initial categories identified during data extraction needed to be adjusted or excluded to accurately reflect the information available in the articles.

Recommendations

This review provides evidence of a lack of robust empirical studies and differing views regarding the nature of Ubuntu leadership. In addition, the inclusion criteria excluded data on the potential exclusionary nature of Ubuntu (Asamoah and Yeboah-Assiamah 2019; Lerutla and Steyn 2021; Walumbwa et al. 2011). Despite recent evidence that researchers are responding to the call for more empirical studies in this field, academia is urged to continue exploring and testing Ubuntu with context sensitive conceptualisations, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches, especially through the lived experiences of organisational leaders who understand the authentic cultural essence of Ubuntu.

Theoretical Implications

This paper provides a clearer picture of the state of research on Ubuntu leadership behaviours within an organisational context and offers direction for advancing this field of research.

Contribution

This review provides encouraging evidence for the inclusion of the emerging field of research on Ubuntu within the context of organisational leadership. In addition, it provides a robust foundation and roadmap to extend Ubuntu leadership theory.

Conclusion

“I am because we are” is a Xhosa proverb that continues to spark much debate about Ubuntu and how it manifests in an organisational leadership context. This systematic literature review and its resulting findings and themes confirm a lack of robust empirical studies in this field. Although several perspectives of Ubuntu in an organisational leadership context have emerged, it is mostly regarded as a relational, participatory, and values-based leadership approach.

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