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Kolk, A.; Rivera-Santos, M.

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The State of Research on Africa in Business and Management: Insights From a Systematic Review of Key International Journals

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Ans Kolk¹ and Miguel Rivera-Santos²

Abstract

Aiming at a better understanding of the extent to which Africa-focused research has helped develop context-bound, context-specific, and context-free knowledge, the authors present the findings from a literature review of journal articles with an African context. A systematic search resulted in 271 articles with African data and 139 Africa-focused articles published in 63 top business journals and related (sub)disciplines from 2010 onwards. The sample included all journals belonging to the University of Texas (UT) Dallas and *Financial Times* research rankings, as well as the main international business, and business and society outlets. An in-depth analysis of the 139 Africa-focused articles shows an important imbalance in terms of publication patterns, topics covered, theoretical groundings, types of contributions, approaches to the African contexts, and empirics. Building on this exhaustive literature review, the authors provide specific suggestions regarding potential data sources and empirical strategies in African contexts, propose avenues for future research, and introduce four recent studies included in the special issue.

¹University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

²Babson College, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Ans Kolk, University of Amsterdam Business School, Plantage Muidergracht 12, 1018 TV, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: akolk@uva.nl

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Keywords

Africa, context, corporate social responsibility (CSR), *Financial Times* journal list, international business, literature review, UT Dallas journal list

The role of “context” has been the subject of ongoing debates among management scholars, especially because the increasing role of emerging economies in international business (IB) has led researchers to focus on less traditional settings (Kriauciunas, Parmigiani, & Rivera-Santos, 2011). Discussions have typically revolved around whether management theories are context-specific or context-free, around the extent to which studying non-traditional contexts can help refine current theories, and whether new theories need to be developed to understand these different settings. In Tsui’s influential categorization, there are three main approaches to integrating context into management research: context-free models or knowledge—theories and empirical insights that are designed to be universal; context-bound models or knowledge—theories and empirical insights that highlight the differences across contexts; and context-specific models or knowledge—theories and empirical insights that only apply to a given context (Tsui, 2004, 2007).

Although these debates can be found in studies of Central and Eastern European economies (Meyer, 2007b; Shinkle, Kriauciunas, & Hundley, 2013) and of Latin American countries (Nicholls-Nixon, Castilla, Garcia, & Pesquera, 2011), most of this discussion has focused on the extent to which research in Asian contexts can contribute to the general management literature (Bruton & Lau, 2008; Whetten, 2009). Complementing Tsui’s emphasis on the importance of studying Asian contexts, Meyer (2006, 2007a) has argued that Asian management research needs “more self-confidence” about its contributions to the literature and has called for more indigenous and innovative research highlighting the specificities of Asian contexts.

By contrast, in-depth investigations of African contexts have been less visible in the broader literature (Egri & Ralston, 2008; Kolk & Lenfant, 2010; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010; Visser, 2006; Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013; Zoogah, Peng, & Woldu, 2015), and we are only beginning to understand the contributions that studies of this continent can bring to general management research and the impact of business on society. As a result, several scholars have called for a better integration of research on Africa into mainstream research (most recently, George, 2015; Walsh, 2015), justified by two main ideas. First, the growth of African economies has been consistent over the last few years and is expected to continue, with a 5% gross domestic product (GDP) continent-wide growth expected in 2016 (African Development Bank, Organisation for

Economic Co-Operation and Development, & United Nations Development Programme, 2015). According to claims in an increasing number of business magazines, Africa is the next frontier for growth (Berman, 2013; “The Hopeful Continent; Africa Rising,” 2011; “The Hottest Frontier; Investing in Africa,” 2013). Similar to how the growing importance of China, India, or Brazil spurred research on these emerging economies, African countries also deserve a careful study, accounting for diversity across contexts and thus avoiding “broad brushstrokes” (Wainaina, 2005).

Second, the African continent with its large number of countries and local variations exhibits particular characteristics that are of interest for scholars. For example, widespread poverty, with 22 African countries ranked among the 25 poorest countries in the world in GDP (purchasing power parity; World Bank, 2015), ongoing wars and post-conflict tensions, and a confluence of social and environmental issues (Darkoh, 2009) unfortunately provide an important setting for research on business and poverty, sustainability, or corporate social responsibility (CSR). Potential contributions go beyond these issues, however. For instance, the typically complex institutional environment, with strong local, informal institutions co-existing and potentially conflicting with more recent national, formal institutions (Rivera-Santos, Holt, Littlewood, & Kolk, 2015), provides a particularly apt context to study the impact of institutional environments on business (Peng, Wang, & Jiang, 2008). In turn, our limited understanding of the extent to which African contexts can contribute to the broader literature also has important implications for the extent to which the broader literature can help understand the specificities of business in Africa.

This article aims to bring research on Africa into the broader discussion on context-free, context-bound, and context-specific models and knowledge, with an emphasis on business and society issues. To do so, the authors present the results of a systematic literature review of research on Africa in 63 top business journals and their related (sub)disciplines from 2010 onwards. Focusing on the articles’ types of contribution, research gaps, and empirical approaches, the study is much more recent and comprehensive in coverage and inclusion of journals than earlier review articles considering Africa (Egri & Ralston, 2008; Kolk & Lenfant, 2010; Visser, 2006; Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013; Zoogah et al., 2015). Building on the results of the systematic review (see Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003), the authors propose avenues for future research and describe successful empirical strategies in the African context, including countries or databases often overlooked by business scholars. In other terms, the goal in this study is to both spur interest in the African context and give suggestions on how to overcome some of the difficulties typically associated with research on the continent.

Method

Sample and Period

To better understand the current state of research on Africa in business and management, the authors conducted a systematic search of 63 top business journals and their related (sub)disciplines. The sample included all journals belonging to the University of Texas (UT) Dallas and *Financial Times* (FT) research rankings as well as the main IB and business and society outlets. Both the FT Research Ranking (45 journals) and the UT Dallas Business School Research Ranking (24 journals) are used by a substantial number of business schools for promotion and tenure decisions and for awarding research time and/or incentives. A substantial overlap exists between the two rankings, so the number of journals adds up to 47 in total (all UT Dallas journals are in the FT list except for *Journal on Computing and Manufacturing and Service Operations Management*). Following previous literature reviews (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006), the authors additionally considered *Journal of Management*, also regarded as a top journal in many universities.

To this set, the authors added the main journals in IB, where discussions of context are prevalent (Peng, Sun, Pinkham, & Chen, 2009). In addition to *Journal of International Business Studies* (included in both the FT and UT Dallas lists), most IB review studies have included *Journal of World Business* and *Management International Review* (Kumar & Kundu, 2004) as well as *International Business Review* (Chan, Fung, & Leung, 2006; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010). DuBois and Reeb (2000) and Xu, Yalcinkaya, and Seggie (2008) added *International Marketing Review* and *Journal of International Marketing*, resulting in six leading IB journals, whereas Treviño, Mixon, Funk, and Inkpen (2010) added *Journal of International Management* to the list. The authors chose to consider also a recently redesigned journal focused on multinational firms, *Multinational Business Review*, and the latest addition to the publication field, *Global Strategy Journal*. These choices bring the total to nine IB journals, eight of which are not included in the FT and UT Dallas lists.

A final set of journals that the authors included focuses on business and society themes broadly defined, covering ethics, sustainability, corporate governance, and social responsibility. Literature reviews in this realm most often take *Journal of Business Ethics* (part of the FT list), *Business Ethics Quarterly*, and *Business & Society* as “a limited list of recognized top-tier journals” (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Beets, Lewis, & Brower, 2016; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010). Considering the lists of potential specialized journals, almost all mentioned by Beets et al. (2016), Egri and Ralston (2008), and

Lockett et al. (2006), we selected those journals both relevant to business and management and included in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). This approach resulted in the retention of five additional journals: *Business Ethics: A European Review*; *Business, Strategy and the Environment*; *Corporate Governance: An International Review*; *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*; and *Organization & Environment*.

The authors subjected the resulting set of 63 journals to a primary search through the Ebscohost database for articles published between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2014. This Ebscohost-based search was complemented by an additional search for forthcoming articles on the websites of the 63 journals as of December 31, 2014. The time frame stems from the fact that earlier overviews that considered Africa (or, more specifically, CSR in Africa) in mainstream outlets have not covered the most recent years, the latest reviews going up to 2011 (Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013; Zoogah et al., 2015). Although the inclusion of forthcoming articles helps to capture a more complete picture as of December 31, 2014, it also has limitations, as some journals have a more up-to-date pipeline online than others. For example, of the four articles published in the *Academy of Management Perspectives* February 2015 special symposium on Africa (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015; Walsh, 2015; Zoogah et al., 2015), only two could be found on the website at the end of 2014.

Analysis

In the set of journals and years described above, the authors used the “full-text” search option as they aimed for exhaustiveness. The search was based on the keyword string: “Africa” OR “Algeria” OR “Angola” OR “Benin” OR “Botswana” OR “Burkina Faso” OR “Burundi” OR “Cameroon” OR “Cape Verde” OR “Central African” OR “Chad” OR “Congo” OR “DRC” OR “Djibouti” OR “Egypt” OR “Guinea” OR “Eritrea” OR “Ethiopia” OR “Gabon” OR “Gambia” OR “Ghana” OR “Ivory Coast” OR “Kenya” OR “Lesotho” OR “Liberia” OR “Libya” OR “Madagascar” OR “Malawi” OR “Mali” OR “Mauritania” OR “Mauritius” OR “Morocco” OR “Mozambique” OR “Namibia” OR “Niger” OR “Nigeria” OR “Rwanda” OR “São Tomé and Príncipe” OR “Sao Tome” OR “Senegal” OR “Seychelles” OR “Sierra Leone” OR “Somalia” OR “Sudan” OR “Swaziland” OR “Tanzania” OR “Togo” OR “Tunisia” OR “Uganda” OR “Zambia” OR “Zanzibar” OR “Zimbabwe.” Searching for every country, including different spellings where necessary, ensured comprehensiveness of the literature review. This procedure did, however, result in a very large number of articles: 1,454 in total. Not surprisingly, many articles

without any real connection to Africa came up in the results due to the search terms. Articles authored by, or citing, any researcher whose first name is África or Chad, for instance, appeared in the search. We also note that some journals may not allow full-text searches via Ebscohost, especially if the articles are stored as images rather than as searchable texts.

In view of these limitations, every article selected by the Ebscohost-based search procedure was reviewed individually to identify those actually associated with Africa. This additional step resulted in a total of 271 articles. Of these 271 (see overview in Table 1), 132 were not Africa-focused, meaning that they either only mentioned Africa in passing or included some African data without exploring Africa as a context. They most often included African countries, organizations, or respondents as part of a larger database, or used African contexts as illustrations or as teaching case studies, or contained interviews with African leaders. Interestingly, these results suggest that contrary to the belief that African countries do not have easily available data, some countries do have quantitative macro-economic data of sufficient reliability to be incorporated into large databases. South African, Egyptian, Moroccan, and Kenyan data are particularly common among articles using African data in a larger database, suggesting the existence of reliable data in these countries. Overall, the analysis thus yielded a total of 139 articles with at least a partial focus on Africa, which were each coded along the following dimensions: *journal and year*, *research question*, *type of research gap*, *research theme*, *contribution*, *theoretical lens*, *type of data*, and *the role of African data in the method*.

Findings

General Trends: Publication Numbers and Patterns

Table 1 shows the full list of journals included in the analysis and the number of articles for each journal, first, all articles with African contexts (in total 271) and, second, the subset of Africa-focused articles (139). In the latter set, four journals account for 56% of the total: *Journal of Business Ethics* (33 articles, 24%), *American Economic Review* (26 articles, 19%), *International Business Review* (10 articles, 7%), and *Journal of World Business* (nine articles, 6%). Figure 1 gives the totals per year, split into Africa-focused articles and other articles with African contexts. In the first 4 years, the number of Africa-focused articles was relatively stable in the 27 to 29 range each year, but there were fewer articles in 2014 and forthcoming. For upcoming years, this special issue as well as those in *Academy of Management Perspectives* and *Global Strategy Journal* are already certain to yield additional Africa-focused articles.

Table 1. Publication Information of Africa-Related Articles.

| Journal name | Articles with African context ^a | Africa-focused articles ^b |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Academy of Management Perspectives</i> | 3 | 3 |
| <i>Academy of Management Review</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Accounting Review</i> | 4 | 0 |
| <i>Accounting, Organizations & Society</i> | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> | 2 | 0 |
| <i>American Economic Review</i> | 38 | 26 |
| <i>Business & Society</i> | 8 | 6 |
| <i>Business Ethics Quarterly</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Business Ethics: A European Review</i> | 3 | 2 |
| <i>Business, Strategy & the Environment</i> | 5 | 3 |
| <i>California Management Review</i> | 6 | 5 |
| <i>Contemporary Accounting Research</i> | 3 | 1 |
| <i>Corporate Governance: An International Review</i> | 4 | 2 |
| <i>Corporate Social Responsibility & Environmental Management</i> | 6 | 5 |
| <i>Econometrica</i> | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i> | 10 | 3 |
| <i>Global Strategy Journal</i> | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Harvard Business Review</i> | 22 | 4 |
| <i>Human Resource Management</i> | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Information Systems Research</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>INFORMS Journal on Computing</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>International Business Review</i> | 13 | 10 |
| <i>International Marketing Review</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Accounting and Economics</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Accounting Research</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i> | 2 | 2 |
| <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i> | 51 | 33 |
| <i>Journal of Business Venturing</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Finance</i> | 5 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis</i> | 4 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Financial Economics</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of International Business Studies</i> | 5 | 2 |
| <i>Journal of International Management</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of International Marketing</i> | 1 | 1 |

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

| Journal name | Articles with African context ^a | Africa-focused articles ^b |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Journal of Management</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Management Studies</i> | 5 | 3 |
| <i>Journal of Marketing</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Operations Management</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Journal of Political Economy</i> | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Journal of the American Statistical Association</i> | 4 | 2 |
| <i>Journal of World Business</i> | 15 | 9 |
| <i>Management International Review</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Management Science</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Manufacturing and Service Operations Management</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Marketing Science</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>MIS Quarterly</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Multinational Business Review</i> | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Operations Research</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Organization & Environment</i> | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Organization Science</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Organization Studies</i> | 3 | 1 |
| <i>Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Production and Operations Management</i> | 1 | 0 |
| <i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> | 12 | 6 |
| <i>Rand Journal of Economics</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Review of Accounting Studies</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Review of Financial Studies</i> | 13 | 0 |
| <i>Sloan Management Review</i> | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Strategic Management Journal</i> | 4 | 3 |
| Total | 271 | 139 |

Note. The number of articles includes articles published since 2010 and forthcoming per December 31, 2014.

^aArticles with African context include all the articles with African data or with a conceptual discussion of Africa, including articles with large databases in which African data are a minority. Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, and South Africa are the countries most commonly found in large databases.

^bAfrica-focused articles are articles in which the African context is explicitly acknowledged, even in the context of studies including other contexts. Articles with mentioning Africa in passing or as an illustration, editorials, special issue introductions, celebrity interviews, and teaching cases were excluded.

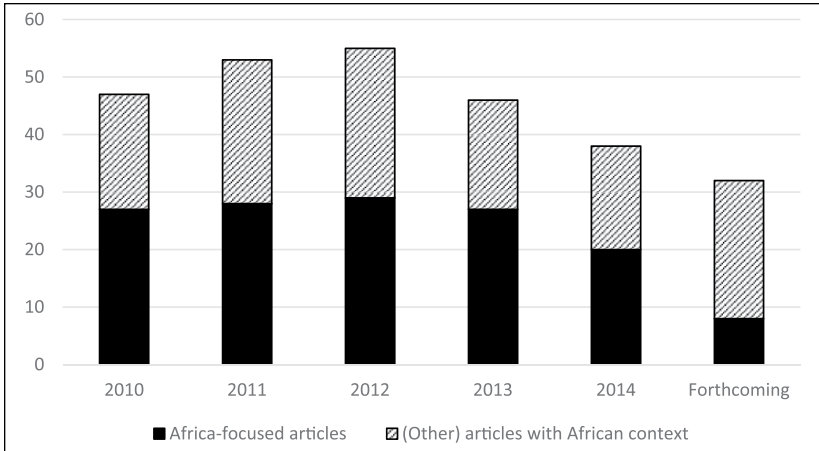


Figure 1. Number and types of articles by year.

Figure 2 includes the number of Africa-focused articles in the four different sets of journals used in this study. Although the number of articles per set obviously differs, the figure clearly shows that the UT Dallas list hardly contains Africa-focused articles (only five in the period covered), whereas the eight business and society journals have many more (50 articles) and so has the FT45 list (98 articles). We note that an exclusion of the *Journal of Business Ethics* would have led to a significant reduction in both of these sets. This journal is peculiar more generally because of the large number of articles it publishes every year: In 2014, for example, *Journal of Business Ethics* had seven volumes consisting of four issues, each usually with eight to 10 articles. This impressive total per year overall is part of the explanation for the large number of articles on Africa, in addition to editorial openness to a wide variety of topics. Finally, and although mostly due to two journals (*International Business Review* and *Journal of World Business*), IB journals also show consistent interest in Africa over the years.

Contents: What Is the Focus of the Articles?

Contrasting with other, more established research contexts, academic studies on African contexts are not found evenly across the different streams of research in management and related disciplines. This pattern suggests that scholars especially turn to Africa when they need to study phenomena that are specific, albeit most often not unique, to the continent. As a result, business and society scholars have been by far the most active in the African context, with 50

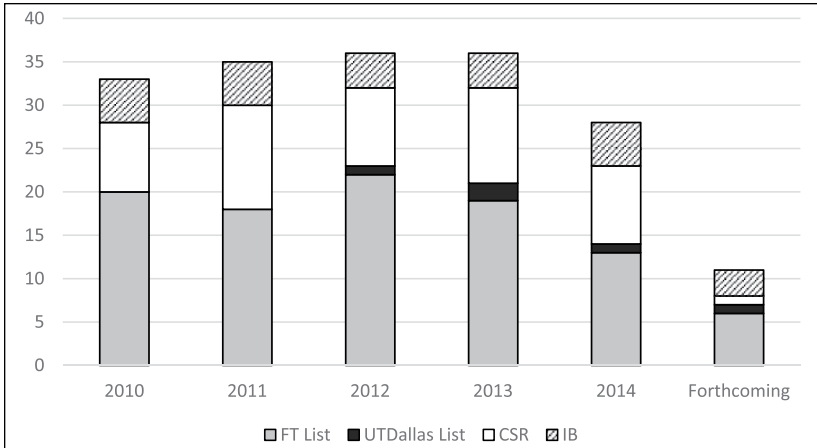


Figure 2. Articles by year and journal sets.

Note. FT = *Financial Times*; UT = University of Texas; CSR = corporate social responsibility-focused outlets; IB = international business journals.

articles published since 2010 in journals. The importance of Africa-focused studies in this field is likely to reflect these scholars' particular interest in poverty alleviation, stakeholder relations, or environmental issues, all prevalent in the African context (Darkoh, 2009; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015). Similarly, economists have also shown a specific interest in Africa, with 33 articles published in economics journals. Economists' interest in the continent seems particularly strong in two sub-streams of the literature: economic development, especially in its relationship to colonization and poor governance (Q. Ashraf & Galor, 2013), and behavioral economics, with a particular interest in understanding financial or health-related decisions made by poor consumers (Cohen, Dupas, & Schaner, 2015). Finally, IB journals have also included a relatively high number of Africa-focused studies, with 24 articles published since 2010, with varied research foci, including corporate governance issues (Adegbite, 2015) or knowledge transfer (Osabutey, Williams, & Debrah, 2014).

Africa-focused research is significantly scarcer in other sub-disciplines, with a surprisingly low number of studies in entrepreneurship journals (only three articles published since 2010), for instance, given the importance of entrepreneurship in the African context. This pattern may reflect a stronger reticence in some journals to data from Africa. It seems easier to publish Africa-focused research in top journals in economics than in business and management. The *American Economic Review*, arguably the most prestigious outlet in economics, has published 26 Africa-focused articles since 2010, by far the largest number in economics journals. By contrast, it seems more

difficult to publish in top journals in IB or general management with African data. An example for the former category is that *Journal of International Business Studies*, the highest ranked journal in IB, only had two Africa articles in the period covered by this review. The imbalance in publishing patterns seems to suggest that some journals and disciplines are more open to Africa-focused research than others.

An analysis of the topics of the articles, rather than the disciplinary foci on the journals in which they are published, suggests an even stronger imbalance in the research areas to which Africa-focused research has contributed. The strongest emphasis, by far, is on CSR, including responsible investment and fair trade, with 41 articles published on this topic. Interestingly, some of these articles are published in top journals outside the CSR-focused outlets (Pfitzer, Bockstette, & Stamp, 2013; Selmier, Newenham-Kahindi, & Oh, 2014), underscoring the importance of CSR for Africa-focused research. Following CSR, corporate governance (with 13 articles), health (12 articles), and economic development (10 articles) are the topics most often found in the literature review. Overall, these topics seem to reflect the specificities of the African context, with a strong emphasis on poverty and social issues, environmental issues, and underdevelopment and poor governance. By contrast, more mainstream topics, such as subsidiaries (two articles), alliances (two articles), or foreign direct investment (one article) rarely appear among the topics covered in this research.

We note that our initial selection of journals, with the explicit addition of business and society and IB journals, is likely to lead to an automatically higher number of articles in certain topics. However, the imbalance is so strong that the exclusion of these additional journals would not modify the overall picture of the literature. A similar picture of imbalance emerges with the analysis of the theoretical lenses prevalent in Africa-focused research. Reflecting the topics emphasized, it is not surprising that economic theory (32 articles), institutional theory (24 articles), and stakeholder theory (10 articles) are prevalent in the literature. More surprisingly, a large number of articles have no discernable theoretical grounding (22 articles). A more careful analysis of these articles reveals that this important subset of studies corresponds to publications in practitioner-oriented journals (Ancarani, Frels, Miller, Saibene, & Barberio, 2014; Berman, 2013) or, more interestingly for this study, descriptive studies (Demuijnck & Ngnodjom, 2013; Ibeh & Debrah, 2011) explicitly aiming at understanding African contexts.

What Is the Role of Context in the Studies?

As can be inferred from the analysis above, the link between the unique characteristics of Africa as a context and the topic researched seems to be a major determinant of the choice of Africa as empirical setting, contrasting with

other settings, like North America, Europe, and, to some extent, East Asia, which are used as an empirical context for a much broader set of topics. In Tsui's (2004, 2007) categorization, context-free research can be found in economics in particular, with a few studies using field experiments with a goal to contribute to universal, as opposed to context-related, knowledge (N. Ashraf, Berry, & Shapiro, 2010; Kremer, Leino, Miguel, & Zwane, 2011) and, very rarely, in management studies (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). In turn, the vast majority of studies in this literature review explicitly emphasize the role of context. Specifically, 81 articles describe their goal as contributing to a broader literature through the analysis of the African context, suggesting a context-specific approach, whereas 58 explicitly aim to contribute to the understanding of the African context, suggesting a context-bound approach. Overall, scholars working on Africa therefore seem to have emphasized the role of the context in their contributions significantly more than in other contexts.

This emphasis on context has important implications not only for the research topics chosen by Africa-focused researchers but also for data collection strategies, especially in an empirical context where data collection has been described as particularly difficult (Rivera-Santos et al., 2015; Walsh, 2015). The majority of articles identified in this literature review rely on primary data (76 articles), with an emphasis on interview data (38 articles) and field experiments (13 articles), which could be explained by the difficulty associated with finding reliable secondary data in many African countries. More surprisingly, a significant number of studies (20 articles) developed a survey instrument for their data collection, contrary to the premise that the data collection infrastructure in Africa is challenging. A closer analysis of these articles suggests that two countries in particular have been able to provide the infrastructure necessary for a traditional survey instrument: South Africa (six articles) and Ghana (five articles), with, in each case, articles published in prestigious journals (Acquaah, 2012; Levin & Barnard, 2013), suggesting a high quality of the survey-based data. By contrast, only 56 articles used identifiable secondary data, many in economics, relying on macro-economic indicators (Aly & Strazicich, 2011) or demographic surveys (Young, 2012).

The pattern of empirical strategies suggests significant variation within the continent regarding the availability of secondary data and the ability to collect primary data easily. This pattern is reflected in the pre-eminence of a small number of African countries in Africa-focused research, alongside a significant number of regional studies relying most often on macro-economic data (with 32 studies incorporating a large number of African countries in a single study). South Africa is, by far, the country where most studies were

conducted (30 articles), followed by Kenya (18), Ghana (11), and Nigeria (11). No other country on the continent had more than seven studies in total in the literature review, suggesting a strong bias in knowledge developed by Africa-focused research. Studies on English-speaking African countries prevail, and so-called fragile, conflict-affected regions are underexposed (Kolk & Lenfant, 2015).

Implications and Strategies for Future Africa-Focused Research

Although a discussion of the specific contributions of Africa-focused research to the broader literature and to our understanding of the African contexts is impossible, given the large number of topics and approaches involved, this literature review points to significant imbalances in its overall contribution to the literature and suggests important avenues for future research, alongside suggestions to overcome some of the challenges typically associated with this type of research. In terms of topics covered, the analysis reveals a strong prevalence of business and society-related research. Although the characteristics of the African context seem particularly well-suited for this type of research, this prevalence also points to important avenues for future research in other themes. In a recent study of social entrepreneurship in Africa, Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) point, in particular, to four dimensions that, albeit not unique, are particularly prevalent on the continent: two are social contextual dimensions, namely, poverty and informality, and two are historico-political contextual dimensions, namely, tribal identity and colonization.

These four dimensions are likely to influence business and society in Africa beyond traditional CSR studies, thus offering opportunities for both context-specific and context-bound research. Poverty is likely to influence the type of business models that can be successful not only in African contexts, for instance, but also in other emerging contexts, with potential contributions to the entrepreneurship, marketing, market entry, or business model literatures, for instance (Chironga, Leke, Lund, & van Wamelen, 2011). Informality and corruption are similarly likely to affect the way transactions are conducted, with tests of boundary condition theories such as agency theory or transaction cost economics and for phenomena such as governance, among others (Luiz & Stewart, 2014). The importance of tribal identities and differing worldviews, such as *Ubuntu*, are likely to have implications for our understanding of how institutions affect both firm-level and individual-level decisions, providing a unique context in which potentially conflicting institutions co-exist (Lutz, 2009; Rivera-Santos, Rufin, & Kolk, 2012). Finally, the influence of colonization on the continent opens avenues for future research

on the importance of historical depth to understand present-day organizations and environments, with potential contributions to not only economic development and institutions but also firm-level imprinting theory, among others (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2013). Overall, paralleling calls by other scholars exploring the role of context in research (Meyer, 2007a, 2007b; Tsui, 2004, 2007), this analysis of Africa-focused research suggests that scholars need to better understand the opportunities of Africa as a context for Africa-bound, Africa-specific, and universal research not only in areas related to business and society issues but also for the broader management literature.

Of course, the challenges associated with data collection in the African context can seem daunting to researchers designing an Africa-focused research project, but this literature review provides several practical suggestions. First, several studies have opted for interview-based data collection as a way to overcome challenges associated with survey data. Even though these studies may seem more challenging to conduct, they can become more manageable when scholars from African and non-African institutions collaborate in research projects or when scholars collaborate with local non-academic institutions, such as not-for-profits, to collect the data, even in particularly challenging contexts (Kolk & Lenfant, 2013; Rooks, Klyver, & Sserwanga, 2016). In some countries, specialized, often for-profit, organizations have also been specifically created to collect data for marketers and for researchers, providing an additional and overlooked potential source of data (Kalan, 2013). Although interview-based data collection is an option pursued by several studies in this literature review, we note that more traditional survey-based data have also been successfully collected in South Africa and Ghana (Acquaah, 2012; Levin & Barnard, 2013), thus providing at least two contexts in which scholars can rely on traditional data collection techniques (Kriauciunas et al., 2011).

Second, scholars should also recognize that reliable secondary data exist and have been used successfully in the literature, albeit rarely in traditional management studies. At the individual level, the *Afrobarometer* provides interesting multi-country survey-based data that has been used in very few management studies, although it is more common in economics (Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011). These data have been, for instance, used to develop a novel measure of informality in the context of social entrepreneurship (Rivera-Santos et al., 2015). Similarly, *Demographic and Health Surveys*, which are regularly conducted in many African countries, can provide reliable data for studies of business and poverty, even though they have been so far mostly used in economics (Lucas & Wilson, 2013).

At the firm level, the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* covers several African countries, and has provided not only data but also guidance for

primary data collections (Rooks et al., 2016). Less known, African business magazines such as *Jeune Afrique* or *The Africa Report*, among others, regularly publish rankings and provide basic information about African companies, comparable with a *Fortune 500* ranking, and are sources for firm-level secondary data across the continent (Ngobo & Fouda, 2012).

At the macro-economic level, many well-known sources, including reports by national statistical agencies, regional development banks, or international institutions, exist, especially in economics, but the authors would like to point to a novel and promising source of data that is still less well-known and could be useful for management scholars as much as for economists: night lights. A few recent studies have been able to link night lights as seen from space with local development levels, providing a sub-national and fine-grained measure to assess economic activity, with the possibility of studying evolutions over time with archival data (Henderson, Storeygard, & Weil, 2012). Of clear interest to economists, this novel source of data can also be particularly interesting for management scholars, as institutional contexts, ethnic boundaries, and colonization patterns can be used in combination with night light data, allowing for surprisingly fine-grained analyses (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2013, 2014).

The Articles in This Special Issue

In the context of Africa-focused research described above, this special issue aims to help advance context-specific research on Africa, with a collection of four articles that illustrate both the opportunities and the challenges of research in the African context. Building on a Professional Development Workshop organized at the Academy of Management conference in 2012, this special issue received around 100 submissions following the call for articles. This large number of submissions resulted in a very selective review process, which would have been impossible without the invaluable help of the many reviewers who very kindly accepted to dedicate their time to this important endeavor. They are listed at the end of this article, and we cannot thank them enough for their constructive and rigorous feedback during this process. At the end of the process, the following four articles were accepted. They represent a variety of topics and methodologies relevant for business and society research in Africa.

In the first article, Anna-Lena Kühn, Markus Stiglbauer, and Matthias Fifka (2018) argue that, although the literature points to a strong contextual-ity of CSR in different parts of the world, we are only beginning to understand the impact of the specificities of the African context on CSR. Based on a quantitative analysis of the CSR reporting of 211 companies in seven

African countries, they find that African companies' CSR efforts focus strongly on local philanthropy and therefore differ substantially from Western CSR approaches and contextual dimensions such as GDP and level of governance standard positively affect CSR reporting. Overall, their results thus suggest that exploring the impact of the specificities of the African context can help our understanding of CSR and its context.

In the second article, Sara Thorgren and Adesuwa Omorede (2015) explore the impact of the passion of leaders in how trust in social enterprises is developed. Recognizing that social enterprises are increasingly important to address social needs in sub-Saharan Africa, they note that we do not fully understand how single individuals can achieve their social mission in a context characterized by acute poverty and where informal institutions, such as trust and collective norms, are strong governance mechanisms. Building on qualitative data drawn from 100 interviews with 37 leaders in Nigeria, they develop an inductive model illustrating how leader passion interrelates with the social enterprise organizing and outcomes.

Taking a different perspective on the same theme, David Littlewood and Diane Holt (2018) build on previous studies to explore the influence of the African context on social entrepreneurship. Grounding their reasoning in new institutional theories and in the literature on new venture creation, they analyze six social enterprises in South Africa, emphasizing the impact of the context on the process of social entrepreneurship, on social enterprises, and on social entrepreneurs. Their article shows that the South African institutional environment and social entrepreneurship are strongly interrelated, thus contributing to the broader social entrepreneurship literature.

In the fourth article, Colin Reddy and Ralph Hamann (2016) explore how multi-national enterprises (MNEs) respond to local CSR expectations, in the context of many African governments' attempts to define and regulate business responsibilities. Grounding their reasoning in an institutional logics perspective, they argue that a higher global CSR commitment will lead to higher local responsiveness when regulatory distance is low, but it will lead to lower local responsiveness when regulatory distance is high. In a quantitative analysis of responses by 93 MNEs to the South African state's Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment policy, they find support for their hypotheses.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, this literature review suggests that the potential of Africa-based research has still not been fulfilled; that many avenues for context-bound, context-specific, and context-free research exist; and that data collection for

some topics may be less daunting than it seems at first sight. We join other scholars in calling for both African and non-African researchers to pursue these opportunities (Kiggundu & Lamont, 2015; Walsh, 2015; Zoogah, 2008; Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013; Zoogah et al., 2015). This systematic review aimed to offer suggestions to help current and future Africa-focused research, and the four other articles included in this special issue illustrate how empirical studies can help develop context-specific knowledge that contributes both to the broader literature and to our understanding of Africa. Through different theories, qualitative and quantitative empirical strategies, and primary and secondary data, they illustrate the variation that exists in Africa-focused research. We hope that this special issue will entice other scholars to continue exploring the extent to which Africa can contribute to our understanding of business and society issues.

List of Reviewers

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Author Biographies

Ans Kolk is full professor at the University of Amsterdam Business School, the Netherlands. Her research areas are in corporate social responsibility and sustainability, especially in relation to the strategy and management of international firms and their interactions with stakeholders. She has published numerous articles in reputable international business and management journals as well as in field-specific journals. In recent years, her research on African contexts has been published in a range of journals including *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *Business & Society*, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, and *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

Miguel Rivera-Santos is associate professor at Babson College, Massachusetts. His current research focuses on the implication of co-existing and conflicting institutional rules, especially in the context of poverty alleviation. Ongoing projects include, among others, institutional voids and business models in base-of-the-pyramid and subsistence markets, the role of trust as a governance mechanism, informal entrepreneurship in the context of formalization pressures, the determinants of conflicts between indigenous communities and multinationals, and governance in cross-sector partnerships. His research has been published in top academic journals as well as in a variety of academic books.