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# Editorial:

## Thoughts on how the *African Journal of Business Ethics* might evolve

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I have been editor-in-chief of the *African Journal of Business Ethics* for just over a year now. This is enough time to get a sense of the inner workings of the journal, the ebb and flow of papers, and, perhaps most importantly, some of the challenges and opportunities of our journal. And so, armed with this accumulated insight, I thought it was high time that I sat down and put some ideas on paper as to how I would like to see the journal evolve, certainly under what remains of my tenure as editor-in-chief, but possibly also beyond that.

## 1. Three issues

But before I jump head first into a context-less, forward-looking exercise, I think it is necessary to first highlight three contextual issues (or problems) at the nexus between the business ethics literature (both in the *African Journal of Business Ethics* and more generally) and Africa. It is these three issues that underpin how I would like to see the journal evolve.

### 1.1 Issue 1: “The native is declared insensible to ethics” (Fanon, 2001:32)

There is nothing really new in my first contextual observation. Indeed, it is something that has been visited and revisited by pretty much every anticolonial scholar from Césaire to Biko, from Sobukwe to Nkhurma. However, in my mind, and in my all too limited reading of these scholars, it is best captured by Fanon in his harrowing words, “The native is declared insensible to ethics” (Fanon, 2001:32).

But this is all in the anticolonial literature. What about the business ethics literature? Well, declarations of this sort, more

often than not minus the air of protest, exist in this literature too. As an example, a few years ago some colleagues and I had a paper rejected by a prominent 'global' business ethics journal. It was a paper that presented a critical perspective of the International Integrated Reporting Council's <IR> Framework (IIRC, 2013) based on empirical work carried out in South Africa. There were of course numerous reasons for the rejection. However, one in particular offended. In building up their argument that an empirical study from Africa had limited generalisability (see Issue 2), one of the reviewers wrote:

On the other hand, developed economies (such as Western Europe) grasp sustainability reporting better. (Anon, 2018)

This sentence is essentially a sub-argument based on the following implicit premises:

**Premise 1:** Economies grasp things when the people who constitute those economies grasp things;

**Premise 2:** Sustainability reporting is a practical response to complex moral issues;

**Premise 3:** People constituting developed economies are superior in their moral intellect than people constituting developing economies;

**Therefore:** "...developed economies (such as Western Europe) grasp sustainability reporting better."

Dressed in this way, the dehumanising offensiveness of this sub-argument, particularly premise 3, becomes patently obvious. Of course, I am sure that the reviewer in question did not intend any such dehumanising offense. In fact, I am almost certain that they gave no thought whatsoever to the underlying premises upon which their argument might be based. In effect, I suspect that this was simply an instinctive expression of Fanon's prejudice, an instinctive expression of "common sense" (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021).

That the offense was more than likely unintended does not, however, render the argument any less problematic or any less worthy of complaint. While stereotyping is a quite normal, and possibly even necessary, aspect of human cognition (Allport, 1954), its negative consequences cannot be overstated. In considering the impacts of stereotyping on out-groups, Fiske captured the essence as follows:

Without stereotypes, there would be less need to hate, exclude, exterminate. ... People do not want to be stereotyped because it limits their freedom and constrains their outcomes, even their lives. In short, stereotypes exert control. (Fiske, 1993:621)

In the context of many "developing economies", and certainly in the context of Africa, this particular stereotype of the moral superiority of people in the West, has obviously had particularly unpleasant history. As Allsobrook and Boisen put it:

... colonialism and other forms of explicit imperial control are legitimated, not by rights of conquest, but, on the basis of guardianship or trusteeship, grounded in a teleology of salvation, or civilisation, of subject peoples expressed in terms of improvement, progress, welfare, development or happiness.<sup>1</sup> (Allsobrook & Boisen, 2017:265)

Hence the focus on this by anticolonial scholars.

These out-group problems associated with dehumanising stereotypes are, however, not the only difficulty. Another, is the corollary false positive stereotyping of the in-group. In the context of business ethics specifically, this problem was highlighted in the call for papers for the 2018 European Business Ethics Network (EBEN) research conference which I will quote at length:

Also the common explanation that corruption and other forms of fraudulent behavior are caused by the existence of corrupt environments especially in less-developed or developing countries, due to low salaries, weak infrastructure, disorganized administration and unstable political conditions in such countries, proves not to be valid. From this perspective, corporate malpractice of western companies has been downplayed as a kind of 'some-bad-apples-theory' where a few ill-motivated actors jeopardize the honesty of the whole system. This, however, cannot explain why it was namely western multinational corporations that have been involved in contemporary corruption scandals in recent years. Even though most of these companies ostensibly had anti-corruption programs and monitoring systems in place, such measures obviously did not prevent management from engaging in fraudulent activities. It seems therefore that corporate malpractice is a widespread and common phenomenon in the business world.<sup>2</sup>

Expressions of this general prejudice (in both its negative and positive forms) are of course not limited to reviewers and authors coming from the so-called developed world. As Africans, we are more than adept at the "self-hatred that comes as a package with colonialism" (Baloyi, 2020:n.p.). Certainly, our propensity to buy into this prejudice raised by Fanon seems to rear its ugly head repeatedly in papers submitted to *African Journal of Business Ethics*, which are of course authored primarily by African scholars. The most frequent starting point for sustaining this self-hate that I have come across in initially screening manuscripts submitted to the journal (and probably even in reading around business ethics in Africa more generally) is Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. As we all know this consistently places African countries as the worst performing countries in the world.

At this point, I would like to beg your indulgence as I challenge this index a little. Even the most cursory critical reflection on this, throws up very significant difficulties. For me the most striking of these is always Switzerland. Now Switzerland routinely occupies a position in the five *least* corrupt countries on the planet. One wonders how the 'little' matter of the infamous Swiss banking industry, a major (if not *the* major) conduit for the flow of money linked to global corrupt activities over the past century at least, manages to evade perception?<sup>3</sup> Switzerland is of course not the only 'little' anomaly. There are many more: other 'dirty' banking industries dotted around Western Europe (in particular); corporate lobbying and political party funding across the developed world, but particularly in the USA; and of course, the supply-side of perhaps the dirtiest of all industries, the global arms industry which is dominated by countries occupying the index's top 25% of supposedly least corrupt countries. But perhaps pointing out these

'little' anomalies are not necessary to undermine this index. Perhaps it is sufficient simply to note that any *perception* index contrived in a context that is so rife with stereotype is surely going to be fraught from the outset.

But I digress too much. Especially given that this index has been much more systematically critiqued by De Maria (2008). Suffice to say, I think that my first issue, that "*the native is declared insensible to ethics*" (Fanon, 2001:32) is well and truly registered.

## 1.2 Issue 2: The odd provinces, the odd provincials

My second issue also begins with something of an autoethnographic reflection on the academic review process. Any African scholar will be able to relate demeaning stories about reviewers who will reject their manuscripts based on an argument that goes something like this:

While your paper is well written, it is difficult to see the global relevance of the research.  
(Anon, 2016)

Or like this:

The context within which your work was conducted is very local, severely limiting the generalizability of the paper's conclusions.  
(Anon, 2018)

In response to criticisms such as these, one might bitterly cry: "But this is not fair!" In support of this cry for justice, one might draw attention to the fact that we, as African scholars, are routinely (one is even tempted to say generally) subjected to papers where the central arguments are shamelessly premised on some idiosyncratic contextual feature of a former colonial or present neo-colonial power. One might complain about how these essentially parochial arguments slide, apparently effortlessly, into the literature on tracks greased with the fallacy that Western Europe and the USA are the centre of the universe. That they are in fact 'The World' and that the rest of the planet and the rest of humanity are simply odd provinces and odd provincials, respectively (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

But we all know where such a cry for justice would get us nine times out of ten. Exactly nowhere. If any response to such a cry were to be forthcoming at all, it would inevitably look something like this:

It is unfortunate that you have elected to adopt such a reactionary and paranoid interpretation of the criticisms of our reviewers. These were intended to be constructive. Remember these reviewers are leaders in their field and beyond reproach. In any event, the editor's decision is final and we wish you luck in finding another home for your paper.

This protest/response is of course entirely imaginary. The rules of the game really preclude most of us from engaging in such protest. This is, after all, the world of publish-or-perish and no-one really has time to waste engaging in futilities. So what is it that we typically do as African scholars?

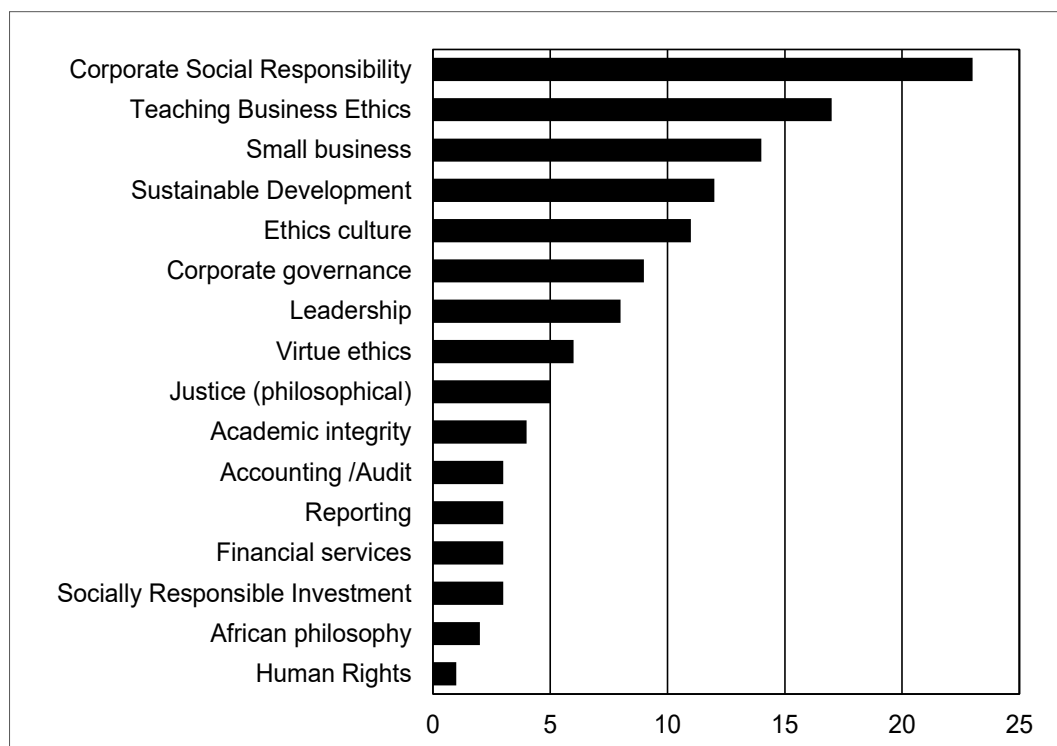


Well, it doesn't take reading all of the submissions to the *African Journal of Business Ethics* for a year to know the most common answer to this question. What we do, is play to the ignorance of many 'leaders in their field' regarding the world outside of their enclave and make wild claims that our local studies are in some way representative of 'The Developing World'. In other words, we frame our studies as a developing world perspective. In doing this we inevitably dilute rich descriptions of the real contexts of our studies with a load of rubbish about this mythical unity called 'The Developing World'.

### 1.3 Issue 3: What, there are no African philosophies?

Which brings me to my last observation. There is far more to African stories than simply the contextual or the material. There are also the ideas: the epistemologies, the ontologies, the axiologies. If you like there are the continental philosophies.

In this regard, a very quick scan through the back issues of *African Journal of Business Ethics*<sup>4</sup> drawing out the most obvious themes and a few of the more interesting obscure ones is rather revealing (Figure 1). Anyone who is reasonably familiar in the 'global' business ethics literature will feel right at home here. General corporate social responsibility, the teaching of business ethics, business ethics in small businesses, sustainable development, corporate culture, and corporate governance have all been very prominent themes over the years. All of these would map very easily onto prominent themes of the 'global' literature.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1: Themes evident in past issues of *African Journal of Business Ethics* between 2014 and 2020.**

Looking specifically at the philosophical themes that emerged, an explicitly African philosophical perspective was found in exactly two out of the 107 papers published in seven years! Compare this to the frequencies of papers which focused on what I labelled as “Virtue ethics” and “Justice (philosophical)”. I should point out that, without exception, these were Western in their particular expressions of these philosophical traditions. In terms of “Virtue ethics”, Aristotle, Aquinas and of course MacIntyre prevailed as authorities as is so popular in the ‘global’ business ethic literature. And in terms of “Justice (philosophical)”, Rawls reigned supreme.

In the final analysis the overwhelming impression here is surely one of thematic mimesis, and specifically philosophical mimesis. We have, it seems, fallen into the easy groove of just doing what is done in ‘*The World*’.

## 2. And the point is?

Much of what I have written above is likely to be seen by many, particularly those in the West (or in ‘*The World*’ if you like) as a bit of an unconstructive critique about the oppression of Africans. Our oppression under the declaration that we are insensible to ethics. Our oppression through the rejection of African stories as irrelevant. Our oppression through the neglect of African ideas and philosophies. Our oppression by ‘*the leaders in the field*’. And of course, our oppression by ourselves. And make no mistake, I most certainly was agitating. However, raising these three issues is really not the main point. It is the starting point, premised on the assumption that it is out of the recognition of certain problems that we can begin to construct solutions. And this is where this reflection becomes forward-looking.

This spirit is most easily illustrated with reference to the first issue. As I mentioned, there is nothing really new in this issue. Likewise, there is nothing new in the promise that emerges out of drawing attention to it. But it is a very profound promise and so worth reiterating. Once again, Fanon is a good place to begin in articulating this. Having raised the prejudice, he then went on to write the following:

The native is declared insensible to ethics ... In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms ... The native knows all this, and laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other’s words. For he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory.

(Fanon, 2001:32-33)

In other words, for Fanon, the recognition of the dehumanising prejudice of “The native is declared insensible to ethics” is nothing short of the first step in a grand humanising liberation of Africans.

So what are the implications of this in terms of the editorial intent for the *African Journal of Business Ethics* specifically? Well, in this regard, I think it is worthwhile to state what my intent is *not*. Firstly, it is not my intent that we will suddenly pursue an editorial

policy which seeks to assert that, as Africans, we are somehow blessed with superior moral intellect to those that constitute “developed economies”. Such an assertion would simply be an act of offensive dehumanisation in precisely the same way as its opposite claim is.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, it is not my intent to pursue an editorial policy which moves to deny that very grave problems exist in Africa, or that many of these might quite legitimately be traced to shortcomings in the moral intellect, or perhaps more correctly the moral will of certain individuals.

What I am, however, calling for is that, when we write about our problems, we examine very carefully the impulses of our colonised or colonising minds to begin with the assumption that we are inherently insensible to ethics or that immorality is somehow endemic to Africa. And let me say that desk-reject decisions will occur for any paper which says: “Compared to the developed world, African countries, and countries in the developing world more generally, are characterised by rampant corruption and ethical failure.” Ethical failure is pandemic.

Enough on editorial and broader implications of the first issue. What about the second issue? My editorial intent in this regard is that we will be a journal that absolutely celebrates stories from Africa, about Africa, and about Africa in relation to the rest of the world. We will do this for no other reason than that we are infinitely curious about the richness of experience inherent in the diversity of our continent and her people. In this regard, I have two corollary appeals to prospective authors. Firstly, please don’t describe ‘*The Developing World*’ and how your study is generally representative of this unless you have a sampling design that can realistically claim to be representative of this thing. Secondly, please feel free to invest extra narrative effort in describing the specifics of the context where your study was actually undertaken. In fact, I insist that you do invest this effort! I want to know what your specific research context feels like, what it smells like, what it sounds like, what it looks like. I believe readers want to know the challenges and joys that life in general and business in particular throws up in your specific corner of Africa.

And finally, in terms of the third issue, let me start again with what my point is not. It is not that Western ideas and philosophies are un-useful, or that we will suddenly begin rejecting papers that examine African issues from the vantage point of these theories. Absolutely not! As Fanon (2001:121) pragmatically put it, it makes all the sense in the world “to put at the people’s disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it [an intellectual class] has snatched when going through colonial universities” (Fanon, 2001:121). However, I believe that it is high time that as the *African Journal of Business Ethics* we become much more deliberate in our intent to highlight ideas from Africa. It is entirely possible that, on critical scrutiny, we will find these ideas have no place in relation to business. Or, put slightly differently, that business has no place in relation to these ideas. But this is ours to discover. And we can only really do this if we take the time to consider ‘*African philosophies, business in Africa and around the world, and where these collide*’.

In the final analysis, a name means something. In the case of this journal, the *African Journal of Business Ethics*, the name of this journal tells the world proudly that this is, or at least that it ought to be, an *African* 'space'. A 'space' in which African stories, ideas, values and conventions find expression, prevail and have impact both here and throughout the rest of the world.

## Endnotes

- 1 This notion of a legitimising narrative is quite tantalising when one juxtaposes the findings of the AU/ECA (2015) report on illicit financial flows from Africa against Kühn, Stiglbauer & Fifka's (2018) findings that corporate social responsibility efforts in Africa seem to focus much more strongly on philanthropic efforts i.e. efforts that might be seen as attempts at conjuring an impression of "improvement, progress, welfare, development or happiness".
- 2 Source: <https://bit.ly/2XkUNKM> [Accessed 24 April 2018].
- 3 As recently as this year, evidence has surfaced of the ongoing involvement of the Swiss banking industry in facilitating corrupt practices (Romy, 2021).
- 4 This included all issues available on the *African Journal of Business Ethics* website (<https://ajobe.journals.ac.za/pub>). This comprises a total of 21 issues in 14 volumes starting with volume 3(1) in 2014 and ending with volume 14(1) of 2020. In total, there were 107 papers.
- 5 A quick glance at the major section themes of *Journal of Business Ethics* (available at <https://www.springer.com/journal/10551/editors>) as (arguably) the most prominent of the 'global' business ethics journal supports this proposition admirably.
- 6 And as Freire (1993:26) noted: "In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity ..., become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restore the humanity of both" (Freire, 1993:26).

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# What constitutes impact?

## Definition, motives, measurement and reporting considerations in an African impact investment market

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## Abstract

Impact investing is quickly gaining traction globally as it has the potential to address many of the environmental and social challenges faced by humanity. Early scholars claimed that definitional ambiguity confounds impact measurement and hence reduces the attractiveness of this investment strategy. To investigate this claim, semi-structured personal interviews were conducted with 13 experts in the South African impact investment market. Participants did not regard definitional ambiguity as a serious barrier. They did, however, find it difficult to articulate specific impact objectives that could match their financial return expectations. More training and information sharing is required to promote the wider adoption of this responsible investment strategy.

## 1. Introduction

In a recent Forbes post, Cox (2018) claimed that impact measurement could be regarded as investing's "final frontier". This statement not only highlights the notion that several challenges need to be overcome, but also that opportunities exist to unlock a new dimension of conventional investment streams. Broadly speaking, impact investing refers to an investment approach that intentionally seeks to create both a social and/or environmental impact alongside a financial return (Watts & Scales, 2020; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Harji & Jackson, 2012). These dual goals can be achieved by investing in funds and entities offering a range of products and services such as micro loans, affordable housing, skills development, renewable energy, and sustainably grown crops.

Humanity faces several grand and interrelated challenges (Martí, 2018). Many of these challenges, including climate change impacts, poverty, inequality and access to education, food, potable water and sanitation are amplified in emerging markets (Hanouz, 2016). As governments in these markets typically do not have sufficient resources to deal with these challenges, impact investors play an increasingly important role (Mogapi et al., 2019; Brandstetter & Lehner, 2015; Ormiston et al., 2015; Burand, 2014; Jackson, 2013b).

A review of the extant literature reveals an increasing receptiveness amongst institutional investors towards this dualistic investment approach (Höchstädter & Scheck, 2015; Skuler, Mokoena, Habberton & Welsh, 2015; Saltuk, 2015) which has also been called cause-based, targeted, community and mission-based investing (Revelli & Viviani, 2015; Hebb, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). Impact investors typically provide equity, debt, alternative assets, guarantees or grants to qualifying entities (Mudaliar et al., 2016).

A number of global initiatives have intensified pressure on investors to consider ethics, sustainability and social inclusion when allocating capital. Some of these initiatives include the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Social Innovation, the Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN) and the United Nations-backed Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) and Sustainable Development Goals (Milligan & Schöning, 2011).

Emerging markets are a key focus for impact investors. Approximately half of all assets under management (AUM) in 2016 were invested in emerging markets (Mudaliar et al., 2017). According to the 2017 African Investing for Impact Barometer, impact investment markets in Southern, Eastern and Western Africa have grown rapidly since 2013, with South Africa taking the lead (Giamporcaro et al., 2017). As in many other African markets, the South African government is unable to meet the demands of the rapidly growing population (Richards et al., 2007; Dollery & Buthelezi, 2004).

Although South Africa has one of the strongest economies on the continent, it is haunted by unacceptably high levels of unemployment and inequality and a critical lack of skills to promote growth (Mudaliar et al., 2016). The investment and regulatory environments in the country furthermore favour large firms and conglomerates (Haddad et al., 2019). Political uncertainty, poorly governed state-owned enterprises and increasing institutional weaknesses have prompted all three major international credit rating agencies to downgrade the country's sovereign credit rating to junk status (ibid) in recent years. Despite these challenges (or perhaps as a result of them), the South African impact investment market remains the strongest impact investment market on the continent. It also offers a doorway to many other African markets (Mogapi et al., 2019; Mudaliar et al., 2016).

AuM in the South African impact investment market in 2017 amounted to approximately \$15 billion (Giamporcaro et al., 2017). This value was 15 times higher than the second-largest market in Southern Africa, namely Zambia (Mudaliar et al., 2016). The South African impact investment market also saw the largest number of deals on the continent. Unfortunately, impact AuM still only represented a fraction of total investments in the

country (ibid). The prospects for impact investment markets in emerging economies, including those in Africa, are very promising (Mahn, 2016; Skuler et al., 2015).

Previous studies on impact investing have focused on bringing conceptual clarity and a better understanding of the investment process and exit mechanisms (Clarkin & Cangioni, 2016; Höchstädter & Scheck, 2015; Combs, 2014; Mendell & Barbosa, 2013). Others have charted the measurement and value of social and environmental impact (Barman, 2015; Brandstetter & Lehner, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2015; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Jackson, 2013a). Attention has also been given to the development of the global impact investment market, and the identification of opportunities and challenges faced by impact investors, social entrepreneurs and regulators (Phillips & Johnson, 2019; Ormiston et al., 2015; Burand, 2014).

Agrawal and Hockerts' (2019) systematic review of impact investment studies shows that scholarship in the field has been mostly exploratory. As such, these authors call for more in-depth studies on opportunity recognition, selection processes adopted by impact investors, stakeholder management, and performance reporting. In this study, the latter was explicitly addressed.

Very few academic studies on impact investing in Africa have been published. Exceptions include Ngoasong et al. (2015) whose scoping study centred on Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Kenya, and Mogapi et al. (2019), McCallum et al. (2019), and Urban and George (2018) who investigated the phenomenon in South Africa. Watts and Scales (2020) also gauged the views of 30 interviewees on how impact investing is influencing new forms of agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa. According to these authors, impact investing is not only a tool for creating new sources of funding for existing development activities. They argue that it is also changing development policies and practices by bringing in new actors, altering the nature and activities of existing actors, and producing new and uneven geographies of agricultural development in the region.

Despite the prominence of emerging markets in the impact investment arena (Burand, 2014), there is clearly a shortage of research in these markets. This study addressed the gap and also responds to calls by Michelucci (2017) to debate alternatives to the dominant Anglo-Saxon impact investment paradigm. We evaluated the views of 13 participants in the South African impact investment market. Specific attention was given to each interviewee's definition of impact investing, their motives for adopting this responsible investing (RI) strategy and views on impact measurement and reporting. Participants were specifically asked to reflect on what 'social and environmental impact' constitutes and whether they prefer standardised or bespoke metrics to measure and report impact.

In line with previous impact investment scholars (Chowdhry et al., 2016; Evans, 2013) the multi-task contract theory was adopted as theoretical lens in this study. This principal-agent model posits that investors (principals) delegate the production of multiple outputs (financial returns and impact) to agents such as asset managers and entrepreneurs. This theory furthermore acknowledges that principals cannot fully observe how multiple agents allocate the resources entrusted to them. As such, trade-offs between objectives



are likely to occur. The risk of moral hazard is amplified by imperfect information, the lack of accountability mechanisms and uncertainty about exogenous events in emerging fields such as philanthropic venture capital and impact investing (Pitesa & Thau, 2013; Scarlata & Alemany, 2010).

Role players across the investment value chain need clarity on what social and environmental impact embodies. They also need guidance on how to measure impact and consistently report the impact generated. Unless these uncertainties are addressed, the building of track records will remain a challenge and will likely stunt the growth of the impact investment market in South Africa and elsewhere. Role players include asset owners (such as institutional investors, including charitable foundations and high net worth individuals), asset managers, demand-side actors (notably social enterprises) and service providers such as consultants, research companies and standard-setting bodies (Harji & Jackson, 2012).

A brief literature review is presented next followed by details on the methods used to collect and analyse primary qualitative data. Pertinent findings are then reported along with recommendations for impact investors, consultants and researchers.

## 2. Impact investing

Impact investing is defined in the following section, followed by discussions on impact investors' dual motives and the ambiguity surrounding social and environmental impact identification, measurement and reporting.

### 2.1 Defining the phenomenon

The lack of a standardised definition has been at the centre of much academic discourse since the term was first coined at the 2007 Rockefeller Foundation convention (Skuler et al., 2015; Bishop, 2014; Drexler et al., 2014; Jackson, 2013a; Harji & Jackson, 2012). When this study commenced (2016), scholars were of the opinion that definitional ambiguity confounded impact measurement and management and hence reduced the attractiveness of this RI strategy (Höchstädter & Scheck, 2015). To further complicate matters, they argued that there was no universally agreed upon set of metrics to measure impact (Skuler et al., 2015; Reeder, 2014) or standardised definition of the phenomenon (Clark et al., 2012). A review of prior studies at the time, however, showed that four elements featured in most definitions.

Firstly, an impact investment was seen as one that involved an active and intentional deployment of capital (Bonsey et al., 2016; Burand, 2014; Freireich & Fulton, 2009). Scholars agreed that the investment must be deliberate and the principal must have financial, social and/or environmental outcomes in mind from the outset (Urban & George, 2018; Höchstädter & Scheck, 2015; Grabenwarter & Liechtenstein, 2011). To reiterate: the impact of the investment cannot be coincidental. The investor must purposefully and actively seek investment opportunities that align with his/her social

and/or environmental objectives. Moreover, the adverb ‘actively’ alludes to the notion that the investor is seeking opportunities and not merely screening out funds or entities that have an adverse impact on society or nature in some or other way (Brest & Born, 2013b).

Secondly, the impact created by the investment should be measurable (Bonsey et al., 2016; Bishop, 2014; Burand, 2014; Drexler et al., 2014). According to Grabenwarter and Liechtenstein (2011), it is essential to establish clear social and/or environmental goals before a financial commitment is made. Furthermore, progress against these goals should be measured and reported to ensure transparency and accountability. Best practices in the field suggest that performance metrics should be based on investors’ objectives and standardised metrics where possible. In an effort to establish a uniform set of measurement standards, the GIIN initiated the Impact Reporting and Investment Standards (IRIS) in 2009 and later the Global Impact Investing Rating System. In a 2015 study, 60 per cent of respondents used metrics aligned with IRIS. Many of these respondents also employed investment-specific measurement techniques alongside the IRIS metrics (Saltuk, 2015).

Thirdly, there should be a positive correlation between the intended social and/or environmental impact and an investment’s expected return (Skuler et al., 2015; Saltuk, 2015; Bishop, 2014; Burand, 2014; Arosio, 2011; Freireich and Fulton, 2009). Grabenwarter and Liechtenstein (2011) stress that there should be no trade-off between impact and financial return. Lastly, an impact investment should have a net positive effect on society and/or the natural environment (Skuler et al., 2015; Saltuk, 2015; Barby & Pedersen, 2014; Drexler et al., 2014; Brest & Born, 2013a; Arosio, 2011). An impact investor must consider the net impact of his/her investment by taking into account the associated benefits and harms (Brest & Born, 2013a). Although principals might have good intentions, they can still generate negative externalities (Martí, 2018). As such, it is important that they pre-empt the full impact of their actions.

In the years since, all of these elements were incorporated into the GIIN’s (2020) definition of an impact investment as “an investment made into companies, organisations, and funds with the intention to generate positive, measurable social and environmental impact alongside a financial return”. Not only has this definition been embraced by contemporary scholars (Barber et al., 2020; Watts & Scales, 2020; Phillips & Johnson, 2019), but also by organisations created with the explicit aim of promoting this dualistic investment approach, notably the Impact Management Project (2020).

## 2.2 Impact investor motives

Although most scholars acknowledge that the motives of responsible and impact investors differ from those of conventional investors, investor motives remain a largely under-theorised and researched topic (Roundy, Holzhauser & Dai, 2017; Capelle-Blanchard & Monjon, 2012). One exception is Richardson & Cragg (2010) who investigated the tensions that arise when responsible investors seek the dual goals of being virtuous and prosperous. They warned that the pursuit of returns should not prevail over the

ethical agenda and claimed that the RI discourse has reached a point where “its capacity to promote social emancipation, sustainable development and other ethical goals is in jeopardy” (Richardson & Cragg, 2010:21).

Richardson and Cragg’s (2010) criticism applies to impact investors as well, particularly those who regard themselves as ‘finance-first’ impact investors. While these investors integrate social and/or environmental considerations into their investment decisions, they prioritise financial returns (Tekula & Andersen, 2019; Harji & Jackson, 2012; Freireich & Fulton, 2009). They are often commercial investors who actively seek out opportunities that offer market-related, risk-adjusted returns. Finance-first impact investors pursue higher returns than impact-first investors and often have a base line (floor) or market risk premium requirement. Finance-first investors typically include banks, pension funds, venture capital funds, sovereign wealth funds and development finance institutions (Barber et al., 2020; Ormiston et al., 2015; Harji & Jackson, 2012). Many of these investors are required to uphold a fiduciary standard and are therefore unable to make investments that lack the potential to yield market rate returns.

In contrast, ‘impact-first’ investors prioritise social and/or environmental considerations and are sometimes willing to accept concessionary financial returns by taking greater risks or accepting a lower return to achieve the desired impact (Ormiston et al., 2015; Brest & Born, 2014). Other impact-first investors, such as charitable foundations and family trusts, tend to be satisfied if their investments yield inflation-linked returns (Harji & Jackson, 2012).

The idea that finance-first impact investors ‘do good’ can be called into question from a Kantian perspective. In his seminal *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant (1785) argued that the moral worth of an action depends on the motive for undertaking the action rather than the consequences resulting from the action. Following this line of reasoning, impact investors’ actions, however, praiseworthy they may be from a utilitarian viewpoint, fall short of the categorical imperative.

Many researchers, especially those in the field of strategic management, have investigated how organisations respond when confronted by seemingly incompatible multiple institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011). As complex hybrid organisations, institutional investors also grapple with the tensions arising from competing goals (Roundy et al., 2017; Greenwood et al., 2011). Whereas some resort to decoupling, that is, showing a public image around one logic while operating internally on another, others compromise (ensuring a minimum of each logic exists) or combine. The latter involves building an organisational identity that can hold the tensions together (Pache & Santos, 2013).

Mogapi et al. (2019) investigated how 15 stakeholders in the impact investment community in South Africa managed the tension inherent in impact investing. They found that participants embraced duality by focussing on value alignment, contracting processes, engaged leadership and sector identification. Muers (2017) concurs and adds that principals need to think about values “as much as they think about growth and financial returns”. As will be discussed in the next section, the challenge of defining social and

environmental impact has also been identified as a barrier to growing the impact investment market (Phillips & Johnson, 2019; Mogapi et al., 2019).

### 2.3 Defining social and environmental impact

Definitional ambiguity regarding the impact outcome of impact investing has been highlighted by several researchers (Clarkin & Cangioni, 2016; Höchstädter & Scheck, 2015; Jackson, 2013a). Uncertainty and potential moral hazard arise from the broad range of opinions as to what impact truly constitutes, how it can be measured and who it should be attributed to. As impact investors aim to make social and/or environmental impact alongside a financial return, it is essential that the desired impact is clearly stated in dealings with agents (Myers & Santo-Walter, 2016; Barby & Pederson, 2014).

Impact themes should be plainly articulated in investment policy statements and monitoring and evaluation strategies. Some themes currently observed in practice are quite broad (such as improved access to water and sanitation) whereas others are very specific (such as improved access to potable water through the development of decentralised water purification infrastructure). Other differences are noted in the targeted time frames and priority regions.

Some scholars are in favour of a broader definition of impact while others prefer a narrow one. There are risks to adopting either of these approaches. Research shows that a broad definition allows investors to pursue a wide range of opportunities (Drexler et al., 2014), but could also undermine the credibility of this RI strategy (Arosio, 2011). In contrast, a narrow definition of impact could create the perception that impact investing is a niche investment approach which could, in turn, limit capital flows to the market. Early studies by Barby and Pedersen (2014) and Drexler et al. (2014) promoted a narrow definition on the basis that it might enable the building of track records, risk and return profiles, benchmarks and standardised measurement practices.

### 2.4 Measuring and reporting social and environmental impact

Measuring the nonpecuniary utility of an impact investment is one of the most debated challenges amongst academics and practitioners (Barber et al., 2020; Urban & George, 2018). Early studies highlighted the lack of a universally agreed upon set of metrics to measure social and environmental impact (Skuler et al., 2015; Reeder, 2014; Harji & Jackson, 2012). Although these scholars and some practitioners have called for the standardised metrics, others have argued that non-financial objectives tend to be so specific that uniform measures are impractical.

The lack of a universally accepted measurement system does, however, lead to inconsistent and inadequate reporting, which in turn makes it difficult to evaluate and compare impact across investments and regions (Skuler et al., 2015). Erratic impact track records also result in divergent views as to what actually constitutes impact. Despite progress in recent years, measurement systems, such as the IRIS and Global Impact Investing Ratings System, still do not completely satisfy all principals' requirements.

Phillips and Johnson (2019) found that although non-profit organisations in Canada acknowledged the importance of impact investing, they made limited use of evaluation and impact metrics.

Researchers agree that there will never be a set of standardised metrics that will be universally accepted and used. Agents should nonetheless report their impact on society and nature as reliably as possible. A review of the literature reveals that impact identification and measurement are the two most complex elements of the impact investment process and hence represent significant barriers to the wider adoption of this RI strategy. In the following section, details are provided on the methods used to collect and analyse data on these and other considerations in the largest impact investment market in Africa.

### 3. Methodology

Although impact investing has become more recognised in the global arena (Barber et al., 2020; Agrawal & Hockerts, 2019; Phillips & Johnson, 2019), limited academic research has been undertaken in emerging markets where the majority of impact investment transactions occur (Mogapi et al., 2019). Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative research paradigm was deemed appropriate. We were particularly interested in how participants defined impact investing, what their objectives were and which challenges they experienced in relation to defining and measuring social and environmental impact.

Secondary data were sourced from academic journal articles, industry reports, books, and the websites of prominent impact investors in South Africa. Primary data were collected from 13 impact investors and role players in the local impact investment market. At the time of conducting the study (2016), no usable population or sample frame existed. A sample frame was thus compiled from sources such as Mudaliar et al. (2016), Rockey (2016) and Skuler et al. (2015). Judgemental and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify eligible participants. To qualify for inclusion in the study, a participant had to be an executive decision-maker or person in a managerial role who has made or has helped to facilitate one or more impact investments over the period 2011 to 2016. Seven participants had master’s degrees and as indicated in Table 1, most held senior positions and had between six and ten years’ investment-related experience.

**Table 1: Sample description**

<b>Position/ job description</b>	<b>Type of organisation<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Investment-related experience (years)</b>
<b>Manager</b>	Large responsible investing asset manager	16 to 25
<b>Investment analyst</b>	Medium-sized responsible investing asset manager	6 to 10
<b>Head of responsible investment</b>	Large responsible investing asset manager	6 to 10
<b>Development manager</b>	Medium-sized responsible investing asset manager	6 to 10
<b>Chief executive officer</b>	Small responsible investing asset manager	More than 25

<b>Position/ job description</b>	<b>Type of organisation<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Investment-related experience (years)</b>
Investment analyst	Large responsible investing asset manager	1 to 5
Senior consultant	Large responsible investing asset manager	16 to 25
Senior consultant	Independent consultant	16 to 25
Chief executive officer	Impact accelerator	6 to 10
Manager	Economics-based consulting firm	6 to 10
Senior project manager	Specialised academic centre	6 to 10
Managing director	Impact development agency	6 to 10
Financial analyst	Non-profit organisation operating in the green economy	1 to 5
(a) Large, medium and small-sized asset managers classified on local and international assets under management		

An interview guide was developed to facilitate semi-structured face-to-face and telephonic interviews. In Section A of the research instrument, biographical details were requested followed by open-ended questions on the definition of impact investing (Section B), investor motives (Section C) and challenges in defining and measuring impact (Section D). Ethical clearance was obtained from Stellenbosch University’s Research Ethics Committee. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved. Directed content analysis was then used to code the transcriptions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Common and contrasting themes across the single embedded case study were then identified (Yin, 2009).

Credibility was ensured by gauging the views of experts, audio-recording the interviews, taking meticulous notes and triangulating thoughts and ideas. To achieve dependability, a reflective appraisal was conducted to confirm that the findings reflected the essence of the raw data gathered. Steps were also taken to ensure that the focus remained on the experiences and opinions of the participants and not our own (Yin, 2009). In the following sections the various themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented.

### 3.1 Impact investing in South Africa

Since the early 1990s many local RI fund managers had an impact investment mandate, either on its own or in conjunction with a positive screening strategy (Viviers & Els, 2017). Most of these mandates centred on the development of social infrastructure and black economic empowerment (ibid). The South African Impact Investment Network was established in 2009 to create a more coordinated market. Unfortunately the network has not been active since 2016.

In 2019, President Ramaphosa launched a national task force called Impact Investing South Africa (2020). The initiative aims to achieve socio-economic justice “by building an inclusive and sustainable economy”. Key areas to be targeted in future include affordable

housing, health, employment, education, criminal justice, access to finance, financial inclusion, environment, energy, agriculture, and skills development (ibid).

Recognising the need for training and information sharing, the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship now hosts annual executive education courses. Specific attention is given to impact measurement and management.

## 4. Findings and discussion

Participants' opinions on an appropriate, context-specific definition of impact investing are presented first. Next their views on impact investor motives are outlined followed by what they regard as nonpecuniary impact and how this impact is measured and reported in South Africa.

### 4.1 Participants' definition of impact investing

In line with earlier international studies such as Drexler et al. (2014) and Arosio (2011), interviewees also grappled with defining impact investing. Most interviewees did, however, allude to one or more of the key elements that typify impact investments. According to the majority of participants, an impact investment should be an 'intentional' and 'measurable' investment undertaken to create both positive social and/or environmental impact.

Participant Four (an agent) stated that she always differentiates impact investing from within the umbrella of RI based on intentionality: "Intentionality shows that the impact was not accidental or a result of negative screening, but creates a focus on key deliverables that generate positive impact." Other interviewees (principals and agents) also stressed the importance of measuring and reporting impact to demonstrate the true value of these investments.

### 4.2 Impact investors' motives

Participants felt that the majority of impact investors in South Africa were finance-first rather than impact-first investors, but qualified their views. They stated that it depends on what kind of an investor the individual or institution is. In line with Watts and Scales (2020) and Phillips and Johnson (2019), most participants believed that agents, notably asset managers, should be finance-first impact investors given their fiduciary duties. Participant One, a large local asset manager, claimed that "commercial risk-adjusted returns come first and foremost before social impact". These institutions cannot risk financial and reputational failure and must therefore examine the financial case as a priority (Ormiston et al., 2015; Skuler et al., 2015).

Some development finance institutions and foundations in the country were recognised as impact-first impact investors. Interviewees argued that a few of these institutions do not regard themselves as impact investors, but should do so given their funding motives. Impact-first impact investors targeted different degrees of financial return.



Participant Six posited that there should not be a distinction between finance-first and impact-first impact investors. According to this interviewee (a consultant), all impact investors should place an equal emphasis on financial return and social and/or environmental impact “otherwise it is not impact investing”. This suggestion is in line with Mogapi et al. (2019), Martí (2018) and Muers (2017) who also stress the need for value alignment when parties in the market enter into multi-task contracts.

While self-interested financial motives seem to dominate, the following remark suggests that there is some recognition of Kant’s moral imperative: “For me it [impact investing] is about taking responsible investing a step further and specifically looking at how to make social enterprises more sustainable, especially those that have a social purpose as the core of what they do.”

The general motivation for interviewees’ involvement in impact investing was the desire to find a financially sustainable way to address grand challenges without sacrificing financial returns. Participants believed that these challenges will not be addressed through sole reliance on government and adaptations to regulation. Emphasis was placed on the use of new technologies and new business opportunities in promoting impact investing as a viable RI strategy. This finding is unsurprising as innovation and change often occur when hybrid organisations acknowledge the latent presence of tensions and seek to manage it (Jay, 2013).

Richardson’s (2013) advice to responsible investors is equally applicable to impact investors, whether they are finance-first or impact-first investors. Given deficiencies in the main rationales for RI (the complicity-based doctrine, leverage-based responsibility and universal owner thesis), he suggests that more attention ought to be given to the temporal aspect of RI. Investing for the long-term is “a better approach for SRI if it is to be relevant to the pressing challenges of promoting sustainability and governing global financial markets” (Richardson, 2013:311).

#### 4.3 Participants’ understanding of impact and the setting of impact objectives

Interviewees articulated a clear aspiration to make a measurable difference over the long term. The wide range of goals pursued by impact investors in the country was aptly captured by Participant Twelve (a development agency). She said that their motivation was to “look for a sustainable way to actually address those very pressing challenges that we face in a very different sphere. So that’s where we first came across impact investing and it just makes sense that there should be a focus across the spectrum, not just on a philanthropic side, but right through to the private sectors”.

Participant Twelve clearly favours a broad definition of impact investing. Other participants had very specific lists of social and/or environmental outcomes that they wanted to achieve. As indicated in the literature review, a broad definition of impact can create credibility issues, whereas a narrow definition can help agents to better measure and report their impact and hence build a track record.



Participant Nine (an impact accelerator) stated “there is no such thing as a standardised definition of impact”. Similarly, Participant Two (an investment analyst) stated that definitions of impact vary, but mentioned that “as long as you clearly articulated what kind of impact you want and how you’re going to measure it up front ... then I cannot see it as a barrier [to growing the local market]”. Almost half of the interviewees expressed the same view. Some participants felt that there can never be a universal definition of impact as social and environmental challenges differ between emerging and developed countries. South Africa also has a number of unique challenges brought on by Apartheid (Brown-Luthango, 2011). This political regime not only exacerbated inequality in the country, but has also resulted in a major shortage of skills.

According to the few participants who perceived definitional ambiguity as a barrier, the main problem was “an uneasiness around the reliability of impact measurement”. They also linked that absence of a clear definition of impact to investors pursuing anecdotal and broad impact objectives “only for the sake of having impact objectives”. One participant added: “The measurement and reporting of impact is likely to remain poor [in South Africa] as some investors do not fully understand what specific goals they are trying to achieve.” Participant Twelve explained it as follows: “At the moment what you are defining as impact is really your own definition [so] the social and/or environmental measurement side is a little bit like the Wild West. There’s just no structure.”

We are of the opinion that the “Wild West” has become a little less wild since 2016 given significant strides made by scholars and practitioners in the field. Guidance on priority areas and regions are also provided by global institutions such as GIIN, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Impact Management Project.

Interviewees stressed that an impact investor should clearly articulate the impact objectives that they wish to achieve to overcome this perceived barrier. Therefore, the actual barrier might not be a lack of clarity on what social and/or environmental impact constitutes, but rather the lack of understanding on how to establish clear and detailed social and/or environmental impact objectives. Agents in particular expressed the view that impact measurement would be simpler if social and environmental impact objectives are clearly articulated from the start.

We are of the opinion that the lack of a standardised definition of impact does not represent a barrier for growing the South African impact investment market. A limited understanding of how to establish and balance impact objectives in relation to financial objectives seems to be more problematic. Related challenges include measuring and managing vaguely defined impact goals.

Furthermore, the attribution of impact will be unreliable if the measurement of impact remains anecdotal and simplistic. The underlying challenge may be related to the implications of a small impact investment market in South Africa. There seems to be a shortage of successful impact investment examples. Without having clear evidence of the impact and financial returns that impact investors can earn, many struggle to articulate detailed objectives.

#### 4.4 Participants' views on impact measurement and reporting

Very few interviewees regarded the lack of bespoke metrics as a barrier to impact investing in South Africa. Both principals and agents stated that several metrics existed to measure nonpecuniary impact. They attributed the use of project-specific indicators to available standardised metrics being too “restrictive and limiting”. Despite the availability of measurement tools, several interviewees grappled with impact reporting. These interviewees claimed that the lack of a uniform disclosure format resulted in inconsistent reporting. Not only were reports incomparable within the same sector, but also over time. Phillips and Johnson (2019) also flagged a lack of knowledge of the impact investment market, inadequate financial literacy and challenges in measuring and valuing social impacts as barriers in Canada.

At the time of conducting the interviews, impact reporting might have been regarded by some participants as a public relations endeavour, especially in cases where agents tried to position themselves as impact investment specialists. A study evaluating the nature and extent of voluntary active ownership reporting found some evidence of such a differentiation strategy amongst local PRI asset manager signatories (Viviers & Steyn, 2019). The researchers argued that local asset managers who highlighted ‘points of difference’ rather than ‘points of parity’ were able to attract more clients who recognised the value of active ownership. The same might be true in the case of impact reporting.

Since 2016 there has been significant market progress with the release of IRIS+, the Impact Management Project’s ‘five dimensions of impact’, the International Finance Corporation’s Operating Principles for Impact Management and further industry alignment to the Sustainable Development Goals (Bass, Dithrich, Sunderji & Nova, 2020). As a result, the impact investment market is increasingly harmonising around a selected number of tools and frameworks, both in terms of impact measurement *and* reporting.

As outlined by Harji and Jackson (2018), there are many methods, approaches and tools in use, or adapted for use, to measure impact. We are of the view that these tools require further streamlining and highlight the need for more documentation and analysis of how these tools have been applied in practice and how effective they are. Thus far, efforts to develop a deeper knowledge base in practice have been led by market research initiatives such as the Impact Management Project, Navigating Impact, and Accelerating Impact Measurement and Management.

Despite the efforts to create coalescence in the field, the 2020 GIIN survey revealed that market participants still regarded impact reporting as a major challenge (Hand, Dithrich, Sunderji & Nova, 2020). An interesting observation regarding the confusion that remains was highlighted in this GIIN survey: although “sophistication of impact measurement and management practice” was reported as the second-greatest area of progress, it also remained the second-greatest challenge (ibid). This contradiction shows that there is still a long way to go to agree on best practices. Judging by the growth in the global impact investment market, the lingering confusion does not seem to be a major stumbling block. More debate and training on the topic is, nonetheless, recommended.

Those individuals charged with compiling impact reports would also do well to heed MacIntyre's (1971) warning about creating a culture of emotivism. This contemporary moral and political philosopher posited that the use of moral language to "manipulate attitudes, choices, and decisions" creates "a theatre of illusions in which objective moral rhetoric masks arbitrary choices". Nowhere is this warning more apt than in global financial markets.

## 5. Summary, conclusions and recommendations

In line with prior scholars, participants in this study agreed that impact investments should be 'intentional', 'measurable' and create 'positive' impact alongside financial return. According to the participants, most impact investors in the country, as elsewhere in the world, prioritise market-related, risk-adjusted financial returns over social and/or environmental impact.

The majority of interviewees did not consider definitional ambiguity as a major barrier to growing the local impact investment market. They did, however, find it difficult to articulate specific impact objectives that could match their financial return expectations.

A more significant barrier is the limited understanding of how to establish and balance multiple objectives. Evidence from this study confirms many of the tensions and trade-offs identified by Mogapi et al. (2019) in the South African impact investment market.

Participants felt that impact objectives were often quite broad, which complicates the measurement and reporting. They called for a standardised reporting format to create consistent impact reports across multiple years – more so than standardised metrics. Some participants also suggested that it is easier to consider the financial merits of an investment before formulating social and/or environmental impact objectives.

In light of the above, a number of recommendations are offered. Firstly, more emphasis should be placed on defining clear social and/or environmental impact objectives that can generate positive financial return. These returns do not always have to be market-related, but should at least beat inflation. Impact objectives should be formulated at an early stage of the investment process and should be specific enough to enable accurate measurement and reporting. Extensive and reliable reporting will not only build a principal or agent's track record, but could also provide a competitive advantage.

Secondly, impact investors are encouraged to share success stories. By doing so, they could provide case studies that will help others set realistic impact objectives and create better track records. Market coordinators in South Africa and further afield should create more opportunities for role players to network and share information on impact measurement, management and reporting.

For the impact investment market to realise its full potential and minimise moral hazard, more education, training and research is required. Future research could focus on the methodologies behind successful impact investors and the development of consistent

impact reporting frameworks. Attention could also be given to the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Impact Management Project and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in promoting impact investing.

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# A ‘moral compass’ of the organisation during a crisis: Exploring the ethics roles of strategic communication practice

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## Abstract

Ethical behaviour has long been a subject of the strategic communication discipline, but in South Africa, there are few empirical studies on ethical practice to date. Using a qualitative methodology, this study examines what constitutes ethical communication and how strategic communication practitioners from diverse organisations perceive their role as a “moral compass” during a crisis. The study indicates that ethical principles of communication are employed, but practitioners still find themselves in conflict with truth-telling. Overall, the results show that respondents identify more with ethical counsel types than advocacy role types. In terms of counsel types of ethics, being authentic, empathetic, truthful, honest, owning up to mistakes, being open and transparent, and being sensitive to stakeholders’ urgent needs were paramount. On the basis of this study, although marked with issues of legal challenges, as well as leaders and clients who often want practitioners to compromise on their ethical conscience roles, practitioners were insisting on performing the role of ethics counsel in their organisations. This study contributes to the strategic communication discipline by offering insights into ethical communication and provides a foundation from which future research can leverage.

## 1. Introduction

Concern about ethical communication in the communication discipline has existed for decades. As communication practitioners evaluate the prevalence, effectiveness, and outcomes of existing ethical principles in the field of strategic communication, the role of ethical communication as the moral compass of



future communication remains an important concern. Strategic communication refers to a number of disciplines within communication, including public relations, marketing communication, corporate communication, and other areas of practice. Clearly, ethical communication during crisis communication is a complex entity that encompasses public relations and a broad field of strategic communication. In particular, public relations, referred to as part of business ethics in a global society, is situated within the management literature realm (Bowen & Bhalla, 2021). However, the field is still nascent concerning ethical training (Bowen & Bhalla, 2021).

Today, strategic communication practitioners are continuously learning about ethics and responding to new practices such as social media, social listening, augmented reality and data analytics, and artificial intelligence, to name a few (Schauster et al., 2020). Research on ethics and crisis communication (Eriksson, 2018) tends to a higher degree to be linked to Western countries, primarily the US (Jin Pang & Smith, 2018; Bowen & Lovari, 2020). While it is argued that embracing ethical responsibilities results in positive outcomes for businesses, many organisations are continuously plagued by various ethics scandals.

A crisis is defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organisation’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2015:3). Crises, varying from an organisation’s wrongdoings to natural catastrophes, often result in destruction and even death, which interrupt the organisation’s business routine, threaten public safety or cause reputational and financial loss. During a crisis, when the feasibility and sustainability of an organisation are enormously threatened, ethical decision-making is crucial, as stakeholders’ trust is frequently at its lowest. From this perspective, communication practitioners should be considered as the “ethics counsel” for the organisation (Bowen, 2008:271). When the impact of a crisis is high, and its consequences are deemed severe, the public expects organisations to handle the crisis with high moral principles (DeMars, 2017). Despite the importance of ethics in organisational decision-making, strategic communication practitioners often face dilemmas in making ethical decisions that might conflict with professional values.

In the strategic communication discipline, particularly the field of public relations (PR), practitioners should consider themselves as moral agents: “A look at conflict literature reveals a moral bearing to ethical communication, that is: How does one manage conflict in a manner that leads to a morally acceptable resolution?” (Jin et al., 2018:44). The PR profession, in particular, is haunted by adverse connotations resulting from the use of propaganda, spin-doctoring, and practitioners’ numerous unethical activities, and recovering from such is essential for professionals. The PR’s involvement with historical or contemporary propaganda is now viewed as a thing of the past because it presents the field of practice as moving towards harmony (Fawkes, 2018). As Moloney and McGrath (2020) observe, PR is weak propaganda if it takes the form of persuasive communication that is meant for competitive advantage. The history is marked by deceitful promotional stunts that have often been adopted to manipulate people’s

approaches to an organisation, its services, goods, and ideas (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Hence, strategic communication practitioners (SCPs) have adopted mediation and negotiation principles as fundamental concepts, moving beyond rhetoric and persuasion (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001).

Jin, Pang and Smith (2018) contend that individual and organisational influences have roles to play in communicating ethically during moral conflicts. However, professional communication codes of ethics interfere with individual ethical decision-making and move ethical responsibility away from the individual to that of the group (Holtzhausen, 2015). Surprisingly, empirical studies accounting for moral reasoning in strategic communication are increasing (Schauster et al., 2020), while their role as ethics moral agents are nebulous (Place, 2019), as qualitative research studies achieve detailed accounts of professional experience. Much data has been amassed on the best practice to adopt when responding during a crisis (Bowen & Lovari, 2020). However, little research has framed the ethical role of crisis communication (Bowen & Combs, 2020), and that which involves ethical communication during a crisis is mentioned as a relatively unexplored concern. Therefore this study answers calls for knowledge regarding insight into an ethical, moral compass. Whereas in previous profiles (Jin et al., 2018) on advertising and public relations practitioners' views of their roles and responsibilities for ethical communication abound (Schauster & Neill, 2017), this study profiles strategic communication practitioners' ethical role as moral compass of their organisation.

Having ethical counsel improves the organisation's reputation as reliable and credible, and builds "public trust". Therefore, the organisation will be viewed as a good corporate citizen. St. John and Pearson (2017:11) argue that "unethical behaviour by a malevolent actor may precipitate a crisis or interfere with its resolution, but this is often not the case". Not from malevolence but from things like moral myopia, arrogance, or naïveté, a great deal of immoral conduct stems. An individual can be highly intelligent in one or more fields but fail miserably as a moral agent.

Previous studies on the topic focused on how an organisation should engage ethically with its stakeholders during a crisis (Jin et al., 2018) and examined South African PR professionals' views of a moral structure for PR practice in the context of agencies (Carter, 2018). This study investigates the role of strategic communication practitioners as a moral compass of the organisation. For this study, 'moral compass' is defined as an ethical framework, which helps manage organisational values and analyse ethical decisions by integrating the knowledge of the public gathered through boundary-spanning activities. To our knowledge, this research is the initial step in exploring ethical roles from the point of view of strategic communication practitioners in South Africa, whose perspectives will not only shed light on years of experience in the field of crisis communication but also on:

1. What constitutes ethical communication during a crisis?
2. The role of strategic communication practitioners in guiding/directing the organisation to consider ethics when communicating with the public during a crisis.

## 2. The obligation to interact as morally responsible agents

Strategic communication practitioners recognise and acknowledge their accountability and resulting vulnerability in the workspace. Most strategic communication professionals offering public relations services provide guidance on the consequences of the decisions and activities of an organisation (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). For competitive advantage, management and staff consider ethics to be necessary, as the double- or triple-bottom-line is directly related to healthy earnings (DeMars, 2017:21). Brunner (2017) states that public relations will 'find a moral compass' to explain its intent and pursue the public interest only by identifying its values. The literature has acknowledged the importance of fostering multifaceted professional expertise, values, and an ethical mindset amongst communication practitioners (Bowen, 2016). Brunner (2017) argues that the subject of ethics focuses on ethics regarding the way people do their work, with the emphasis placed beyond professional codes of ethics to include general morality and citizenship. Organisation communicators must protect reputations and stakeholder relationships (Farmer, 2018). The organisation's leadership must set the tone in the organisation to apply the moral compass. Given the complexity of working within an organisation, communication practitioners often face various stakeholders who may consider compromising the organisation's values during a crisis, which should be considered when making ethical decisions. However, the responsible exercise of moral action requires careful consideration of the circumstances, especially from the point of view of all relevant stakeholders; it is the duty of moral agents to foresee the possible consequences during their deliberations.

## 3. Stakeholders' interest in crises

Stakeholders often pressure an organisation during a crisis by demanding answers, asking for information, and looking for a resolution (Bowen, 2016). It is a rare communication practice that does not experience a 'problem of principle' and heightened clients' expectations creating an environment rampant with ethical hurdles.

To embrace this 'ethical approach,' organisations must attend to all affected stakeholders (Farmer, 2018); prioritise stakeholders on the basis of the circumstances and alter these priorities as cases develop (Xu & Wu, 2020); and shape decisions that equally represent and consider the interests of all stakeholders (Sandin, 2009). In September 2017, in the wake of the campaign to provoke racial tension in South Africa, Bell Pottinger, one of the biggest and most prominent public relations agencies in the UK, was placed under administration amid an exodus of customers and mounting losses. If not careful, the case of Bell Pottinger, which met its demise due to the unethical campaign it conducted on behalf of a private corporation suspected of engaging in state corruption in South Africa, is unavoidable (Azionya, Oksiutycz & Benecke, 2019). "Arguably, the greatest such weakness is that dominant research perspectives are broached from management standpoints with market-based organisational concerns as the focus (e.g., protecting reputation, profits)" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018:19).

## 4. Ethical decision approaches

The decision-making process that an organisation engages in is often aimed at balancing competing stakeholder interests. Ethics refers to a set of moral principles and rules intended to protect all stakeholders' interests while communicating in times of crisis (Tao & Kim, 2017). Literature shows that most communication techniques and methods designed to influence the habits and attitudes of target audiences in modern public relations efforts, include both selfish persuasion tactics and genuinely benevolent initiatives (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). More practitioners remain involved in mixed-motive communication campaigns and programmes designed to help organisations and their stakeholders (Grunig, 2014). Tao and Kim (2017:698) argue that “without an ethical compass to guide its decisions”, an organisation could adopt strategies that oppose stakeholder expectations, strain its relationships with stakeholders and risk its legitimacy.

Grunig (2014:9) restates two proposed principles: firstly, teleology – practitioners in ethical public relations question how their organisation's ethical communication decision might affect the public regarding ethical behaviour that provides the greatest good to many people. Secondly, deontology – practitioners in ethical public relations have a moral duty to expose these implications to the affected public and to participate in conversations with audiences regarding possible decisions that could impact them. Practitioners seeking to apply these principles are affected by the lack of clear guidelines in addressing ethical dilemmas created by various obligations to a number of competing pursuits. The justice and the care ethics are the two ethical approaches that delineate how organisations can respond to stakeholders' pressure. The ethics of justice developed from the philosophy of social justice theory, advocates for standard rules for people to be held to (Farmer, 2018). The ethics of justice entails that organisations treat involved stakeholders fairly through impartial decision-making, which recognises all stakeholders' interests during the crisis (Sandin, 2009). The organisation reacts critically and adopts empirical methods, human rights, and reasoning (Tao & Kim, 2017), drawing on diverse views centred on objectivity and logic. An ethics of care emphasises nurturing relations and transmitting values, such as empathy and compassion (Sandin, 2009).

## 5. Theoretical framework

Using Fitzpatrick and Gauthier's (2001) responsible advocacy theory as one of the applied conceptual foundations, this study examines what constitutes ethical communication in a crisis and the strategic communication practitioner's role in guiding/directing the organisation to consider ethics when communicating with the publics in a crisis. The theory of responsible advocacy emerged out of the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig, 2014). Practitioners counsel the institution on communication tactics and strategies, which can be customised to attract and retain the support of important electorates, called publics, or stakeholders. Practices typically adopted to assist organisations in establishing good relationships with the media, staff, shareholders, societies, government officials,

and other audiences include strategic, often persuasive communication (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Critics of responsible advocacy theory suggest a postmodern lens and reflexive approach to ethics, rejecting the 'metanarratives' of ethical guardians and advocate archetypes (Holtzhausen, 2012). Grunig (2014:7) explains that "asymmetrical practitioners who see their social role as conservative or radical typically choose organisations whose partisan values are similar to their own. Such practitioners then can passionately defend or promote the interests and values of their client organisations ... however, practitioners who defend partisan values often make unethical decisions because of too much commitment and obedience". Most professionals adhere to some basic level of ethical theory. Communication practitioners make decisions on the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of such acts based on their own moral principles, whether they are embedded in early childhood teachings, faith or religious convictions, or simply shaped life experiences (Jackson & Moloney, 2019).

## 6. Methodology

To gather and analyse data, the research design draws on participants' interviews. The underpinning methodology takes a qualitative approach in recognising that the inquiry attempts to get close to the participants involved in strategic communication practice, their social processes, and the context in which they and their practice is situated (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were utilised because the characteristics of target participants were not easily accessible (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The use of qualitative research methods allowed researchers to inquire into the ethical standards of the practitioners and their position as the organisation's moral agents. The interview was deemed the most appropriate technique for a field of inquiry, which was previously unknown, as it offers a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). Interviews have previously been used to study public relations' role as ethical conscience (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) and the use of influence tactics by senior public relations executives to provide counsel (Neill & Barnes, 2018). Ten strategic communication practitioners (seven participants were female and three male) from South Africa were recruited and interviewed between July 2020 and October 2020.

Given that interviews were focused on professional experiences of ethical issues, participants were required to have at least five years' experience in the industry – the experience of practitioners ranged from six to twenty-four years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of the ten interviewees via WhatsApp voice calling or Zoom video call, and three over email. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, enough time to create trust and rapport, and in most cases, to penetrate under the professional persona and capture some more unguarded opinions and practices, which were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Participants were anonymised, given the potentially sensitive nature of the results. After collecting data and transcribing the interviews, researchers systematically coded data through a thematic analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including data reduction, data display, and conclusion

drawing/verification, using Atlas Ti. software. First, all data were read to gain a holistic understanding of the themes while making initial notes. Second, the information was repeatedly re-read to form preliminary codes, which were grouped and put into more significant categories or themes, merging to prevent repetition. Finally, data were read to ensure that all data supported the assigned theme. Our analysis of such data represents ontological and epistemological assumptions, which are consistent with a constructivist study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the analysis and coding process, the researchers remained reflexively aware of their personal biases and their effect on the interpretation of the data. To deal with this, the researchers engaged in member checks with selected participants and often wrote memos during the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The trustworthiness of reliable qualitative research is assessed to be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness, researchers used two key techniques: (1) member checking (testing themes, interpretations, and conclusions through follow-up interaction with respondents, as well as comments from respondents after interviews); and (2) thorough clarification of context and explanation (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researchers work through the findings in the following section, grouped by the two broad themes of the RQs, describing sub-themes where they occurred.

## 7. Results

### Strategic communication practitioner's role as a moral agent

When asked to talk about what constitutes ethical communication and their role as a moral agent during a crisis, most participants largely expressed a professional position in line with the ethical counsel, using the organisation's code of ethics and moral principles. Results reveal both ethical counsel and advocacy role types.

#### 7.1 Ethical counsel role types

Symmetrical professionals see themselves as counsellors who assist client businesses in applying shared principles when making decisions (Grunig, 2014:7).

##### 7.1.1 Being authentic during a crisis

One group of strategic communication managers at a public sector organisation opined that the "view that every single piece of communication that you share on behalf of a client should be authentic and ethical", adding that the "tone [should] be authentic, approachable, honest and as open as possible". A head of communications in the public sector referred to the impact on the authenticity of strategic communication practitioners as "Misrepresentation of facts to make the company look good at the expense of stakeholders ... Failure to protect those who may be affected by the situation in the long-term ... Failure to apologise". This is consistent with the view that ethical communication is predicted on specific values, such as being truthful, concise, and responsible with one's



words and the resulting actions” (Surdu et al., 2021). Sisson and Bowen (2017) elucidated that the most essential basis of authenticity is a good intention, known as good will or pure moral will, that could not be corrupted.

### **7.1.2 Being empathetic and truthful on how the organisation is handling the crisis**

Compensation, apology, and sympathy were seen as signs of taking responsibility and showing empathy for impacted consumers, and, in particular, expressing sympathy could be seen as an accommodative response (Xu & Wu, 2020:355). A corporate communication manager at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) argued that, “It’s truthful, communicated in a manner that is easy to understand, shows empathy/sensitivity to the issue at hand, and demonstrates how the organisation is handling the issue.”

Implied in such an account is an empathetic and truthful SCP that cannot stop communicating; however, this was a far more complicated picture for one marketing and communications executive agency: “during a crisis, you cannot stop communicating”. Participants highlighted their moral responsibilities to others, as well as to themselves or to organisations. For instance, “Empathy is so important because you are putting yourself in the shoes of the people that you are producing or creating products and services for”. Therefore, an ethics of care stresses nurturing relationships and expressing ideals, such as empathy and compassion (Farmer, 2018), which were important for the communications manager. Kang and Berger (2010) concur that strategic communications officers are uniquely suited to serve as corporate consciences.

### **7.1.3 Being honest and owning up to mistakes and being ready to give an apology when things go wrong**

For one head of communications, it meant having “to be honest, to own up to mistakes and apologise”. For one PR consultant, being honest meant “there must be synergies so that you don’t get caught lying”. For this type of participant, SCPs “must be honest as a communications practitioner in that particular situation”. Apologies are emblematic comebacks of an organisation during a crisis. Thus, Koehn (2013) argued that simply apologising is not enough to eliminate negative effects. Naming the wrongdoing for which the apologisee takes responsibility, taking responsibility for the wrongdoing, promptly apologising, conveying a settled, just, and prudent CEO character, creating a supportive, consistent context, delivering the apology in person, exhibiting empathy, and following through on the apology are pertinent factors to consider (Cheung & Leung, 2016). In some cases, the desire for SCPs to satisfy their bosses and get a promotion might affect their judgement and encourage them to be complicit in the lie. A managing director rejected the persuasive advocate archetype, becoming selfish, which prolongs crisis:

I think the other thing that prolongs a crisis is because we are all trying to watch our back, and as such, we become selfish. We no longer communicate honestly, and if you can’t communicate honestly, you are definitely not communicating ethically because ethics go with honesty.

Some participants placed emphasis on honesty and accuracy of information:

So, it's all about the value of being sincere, the value of being honest, the value of being accurate and forthcoming with information so that people can then have trust in you and the organisation so that they don't feel that they are being misled in any way. ... taking into consideration the people who're affected by crises.

For one marketing and communications executive, it meant having a decision or conduct or action that does not cause harm either to self or stakeholders:

It implies being honest. But it is easier said than done cause sometimes, by being honest and transparent, you may cause harm to others. So, it's very, very difficult.

Many participants – again resonating the discussion of the moral counsel that companies make mistakes and SCPs have a responsibility to be fair at all times – talked about: “being honest is not always about being right all the time”.

This managing director at a communications agency explained:

The main thing is honesty; simplicity, you know you need to make sure that what you are communicating is simple enough for people to understand. When a crisis happens, what companies will do is to drop and bring in lawyers, and there's a legal person who speaks, and people don't understand.

While many participants spoke about their counselling role of honesty with people, the last part of the quote appears to describe the constraints many meet in the boardroom.

One participant expressed that being honest demonstrates integrity and fairness:

Communication that is backed, that is fact-based and has the whole amount of honesty, integrity, and being fair at all times.

One head of a strategic communication department in a public sector organisation with 24 years' experience also talked of apologising if the organisation is wrong and the importance of aligning with the company values to guide during crisis communication:

It is important because even if when you are in the wrong as an organisation, I believe it is very important to apologise and to ensure your stakeholders in the public that you are taking action to right your wrongs, and there's also a flip side of it.

Stakeholders always have a way of finding the truth. So eliminate any type of communication that will expose you to further interrogation, either by the public or by your stakeholders.

Here, being honest is helpful to avoid exposure to further interrogation as truth will always come out. This mirrors Place's (2019) findings that PR professionals applied values such as justice, honesty, fairness, transparency, and loyalty to their decision-making. Also, Neill and Barnes' (2018) agreed with the findings that PR had internalised a code of ethics as they found it consistent with their own values. A view that practitioners are fundamental to their thoughtful decision-making and responsible thinking (Surdu et al., 2021).



#### 7.1.4 Being open and transparent about what happened during a crisis

Maintaining information transparency is important to create the capacity for risk communication to support all stages of emergency management. One public sector corporate communications manager described the role of “ensuring that factually correct information is communicated as it becomes available”. Transparency is very critical for crisis communication in the digital era (Cheung & Leung, 2016) and takes on even greater significance during a crisis (Sisson & Bowen, 2017): “Being transparent and open while following the necessary protocols.”

For another participant, keeping communication channels completely open was important:

Being ethical during a crisis means to keep communication channels completely open. Be available 24/7. No comment is never an option. Look at all communication like your emails and WhatsApp messages etc.

One strategic communications manager overwhelmingly saw technological changes (particularly the growth of “supercomputer” as a key medium for public verification of SCPs messages) as a compelling reason for organisations to be more accessible and transparent with their audiences and to share information wherever possible:

Almost everyone has a supercomputer in the palm of their hand and can verify any single statement within minutes.

A compelling reason for organisations to be more open is that not saying anything is tantamount to guilt:

I do believe that the most successful companies do hold strategic communication in high regard and utilise it effectively. Again, in today’s digital age – not saying anything is tantamount to guilt. We live in a world where not communicating and engaging is just not an option.

In line with humanitarian care, one head of communications recalled her experience and a need to use openness as activism for miners’ rights during the Covid-19 crisis:

I have noted that a crisis such as the Coronavirus has made us step up our human rights activism as we advocate for miners’ rights.

The participants further clarified how their employers, especially in a crisis, were still reluctant to reveal potentially harmful information. Leadership is not easily persuaded, and similarly, Jackson and Moloney (2019:87) allude to “practitioners [that] flow between ethical identities, painting a fluid, complex and occasionally contradictory picture of ethical practice that does not fall neatly into ethical metanarratives”:

It took time to decide as an organisation that the way forward will be to write to all our stakeholders, informing them of what our CEO had done. It took a number of meetings and rewriting of statements before considering the final action to take.

Another respondent emphasised openness and transparency and rejected the persuasive advocate archetype:

It is about transparency and being truthful, being honest about whatever crisis ... because as a communicator, you might have heard of the term that is used out there to refer to us as spin doctors, which has a negative connotation because if someone calls you a spin doctor, it means somewhere along the value chain you are forced to spin the facts, which is not ethical communication.

Lack of transparency can have devastating effects that sometimes leave a permanent stain on an organisation (Roberts, 2018). Hence this observation is further strengthened.

Participants note the contemporary media environment in which investigative journalists pressure transparency issues, making the SCP industry warier of doing spin:

You get journalists calling, and an anonymous source will speak the truth, and they will ask me later to comment. What the anonymous source said is the right thing, and on this side, I am trying to defend things that are not necessarily 'defendable.' So, that is why communication should be transparent.

The participants explained how timing and language suitable for the intended audience are important:

An ethical message ... transparency. The timing of that message and who the intended people of that message are; and the language used in crafting that message so that the message does not get lost. So, your conduct again, you must be transparent.

For one managing director at an agency, being sincere and openness to acknowledging wrongdoing was crucial for the practitioners:

It is communication that is sincere, that is based not to spin or mislead people but to empower them to fully understand the crisis. If it requires the organisation to acknowledge wrongdoing – perfect, they have to acknowledge wrongdoing. If it requires the organisation to apologise for whatever crisis they caused, they have to.

The practitioners indicated their working with teams during a crisis centred on the dialogue principle (Grunig, 2014). Again, a participant described the need to be visible and accessible:

You need to be a visible and accessible company because you need to understand where the other parties are coming from in terms of seeking closure, seeking information that will better inform them.

As the previous quote suggests, it was a common sentiment to associate ethics with legal problems, shared by around one-third of our participants, such as this managing director at a communication agency:

Emotions are part of those. You will be dealing with people – some got high emotions, some have got anxieties – to be part of your crisis communication. You do need legal

because you need to be sure that you are still legally protected. But, on the other side, that is where the challenge comes from because the lawyers will tell you to just shut up and don't say anything because you are going to incriminate yourself.

Here the study is not the first to reveal this. In the UK, Jackson and Moloney (2019) and the US, Bowen (2008), for example, found similar sentiments amongst public relations practitioners (PRPs), with a variety of complex reasons as to why such practices are pursued. The tension between legal practice and communication practice can obstruct openness and transparency. This agrees with literature, which suggests that legal professionals favour protective tactics, urging clients to remain quiet (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Gibson & Padilla, 1999). Crisis communication scholars emphasise a more accommodative method, including transparent and truthful communication, along with remedial action, which could be viewed as a concession technique (Seeger, 2006). Thus, a group corporate affairs spokesperson was of the view that:

Being transparent about the incident, what happened or at least what we think has happened, the causes/s, the impact on human life, communities, the bottom line. Communicating information as soon as possible and not causing unnecessary delays in terms of communication.

Furthermore, Surdu et al. (2021) sum this up well by suggesting that practitioners' ethical communication should consider the medium or even the language chosen for delivering a message. This implies that the message should be accessible to all stakeholders. Bowen (2018) argued that business research ethicists implicitly, if not explicitly, endorse a stakeholder approach to construing the moral responsibilities of business.

#### **7.1.5 Being sensitive to stakeholders' urgent needs in a crisis even at the expense of profits**

Holtzhausen (2015) indicates that it is the practitioner's role to make his or her own institution aware of the immoral act and speak up on behalf of the other. Based on humanitarian care (for victims of crisis), being sensitive to stakeholders' urgent needs in a crisis, even at the expense of profits, was mentioned by participants as noted below:

To be sensitive to what people are going through. For example, Coca-Cola diverted money meant for advertising to humanitarian purposes.

Participants referred to their personal virtues: "It's all about what and how you would like to be treated if you are at the receiving end." Addressing inequality in education and health issues, one communications manager expressed that ethics should supersede profit-making: "Ethics really needs to be at the heart of that and not just about profits."

The participant further showed that these moral thickets were once again central to clients:

And it's not just about me and how much money I can make, but how is it serving the people that are buying from me or how is it serving my country and things like that. So putting people at the heart of all your decisions is, for me, quite important.

This is consistent with Place (2019), who found that participants adapted to honing moral sensitivity and intuition.

### 7.1.6 Being truthful and not misleading the public

Strategic communication practitioners were aware that in advancing the interests of clients and employers, they adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth. Still, truth is always elusive in practice, as it is affected by perspective, viewpoint, completeness of facts, understanding, and perception (Jackson & Moloney, 2019). Holtzhausen (2015) acknowledges that ethical practice is based on allowing them to speak for themselves and is based on dissensus, questioning power, and speaking truthfully in one's voice. An argument by Edwards (2021) suggests that disinformation has a well-established pedigree across the PR industry, manifesting as intentional dissemination of incorrect information, hiding or maintaining silence about issues, and reframing issues in order to deflect debate and serve organisational interests. One junior corporate communications manager with more than six years' experience says:

Wilfully misleading stakeholders or the public will have a negative impact on the company in the long run in terms of the reputation and image of the company. It erodes trust and confidence in the company, which may take a while to restore, if ever.

Although strategic communication practitioners want to be truthful and not mislead the public, there is a dilemma related to almost every participant's wider concern, the customer relationship, which is full of tensions. After the truth is exposed, sponsors will leave the organisation. One senior head of communications with 16 years' experience across a variety of sectors sees strategic communication practitioners trapped between their telling the truth and losing short-term trust with their organisational funders. The expression of one respondent indicates that reputation has a decisive effect on the internal and external variables, which ensure the survival and even growth of a business. The participant recalled having to face the dilemma of a CEO who stole funds, but they chose to tell the truth:

For example, I also worked for a respectable NGO where the CEO embezzled funds. We were faced with the dilemma of just dealing with it in-house and remaining silent about it or come out in the open and tell the truth, risking losing trust with our funders. We opted for the latter, and it cost the organisation a lot as funders pulled out, and up to today, it is still struggling, but at the same time, it is rebuilding its reputation.

Bowen (2018) suggests that ethics involves systematising, recommending, and explaining or defending right behaviour.

For this type of participant, companies must be responsible; however, it is difficult to conceal information because of social media:

Companies have to be responsible when they issue out statements on communication crises to protect their reputation because these days, it is hard for companies to conceal information, even if they want to, because of social media.

For her, truthfulness is important when considering the bigger picture:

Companies have to look at the bigger picture. For example, Tiger Brands had to tell the truth, even if they stood to lose, but they knew telling the truth had far more positive implications in the future than the losses they stood to lose in the short term.

As one PR consultant agency put it: “Tell the truth. About what is happening.”

The value of PR cannot be monetarised. The sympathy reaction is deemed more intimate and warmer. The organisation reacts to the public in some way to display their sympathy, which decreases the intensity of aversive emotions, such as fury (Xu & Wu, 2020). One participant noted:

Companies have a problem because the value of PR cannot be monetised sometimes, which is why research has become an integral part of PR in recent years to determine the benefits.

Another participant stated:

Being truthful to all stakeholders. Yes, because stakeholders (customers, employees, and local communities) will remember how you have responded during a crisis, which directly impacts the profitability and sustainability of the business.

The statement of being truthful to all stakeholders is disputed by Farmer (2018:6), who indicates that “in theory, it is easy to say that an ethical decision should not only favour the client’s interests but must, on the contrary, balance the client’s interests against those of all stakeholders. In practice, however, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this idea”. Surdu et al. (2021) explain that truthfulness and honesty imply practitioners should present information most reliably and as factually as possible with professional integrity.

## 7.2 Ethical advocacy role types

Asymmetrical practitioners consider themselves advocates of their clients’ partisan values (Grunig, 2014:36; Farmer, 2018). According to Grunig (2014:7), advocates see their position as interpreting “truth” or “facts” in a manner that places their client in the most favourable light or is likely to provide support for the position of their client.

### 7.2.1 Being available to update or communicate useful information

When it comes to the role of being available to update or communicate useful information, there seems to be some acknowledgement. As one head of communications admitted, it is important “to constantly update the audience with relevant, useful information. This is also time for a constant update to your audience with relevant information”.

A group corporate affairs spokesperson at a public organisation was also nuanced:

To be available to the media and other key stakeholders who need to be kept apprised on what has happened and the impact thereof to correct inaccuracies that may be prevalent.

Another participant added:

Timing – be available 24 hours a day – that includes a company representative that is media-ready. Frequency – depending on the severity of the crisis, updates can be provided to the media on an hourly or three times per day basis, depending on the crisis. There is no excuse on earth why communication cannot be effective in 2020. Assure the public that your brand remains safe and dependable.

Pointing to how practitioners need to be available to update the public, it is important to establish consistency as it contributes to building trust, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality, and community with stakeholders (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2016).

### **7.2.2 Being proactive as the eyes and ears of the organisation through boundary spanning**

Grunig (2014) was correct in suggesting that PR professionals can personify an organisation's 'ethical conscience' as long as they manage its reputation (Bowen, 2008). Similar to journalists, strategic communication practitioners, in particular, are involved in interfering with the moral impulse of others because of their role of representing others and creating a false reality and a moral distance between the self and the other (Holtzhausen, 2015). A PR consultant believed that SCPs were being proactive as the eyes and ears of the organisation through boundary spanning.

We must be proactive. We must anticipate the crisis. As communication practitioners, one of our roles is to be the eyes and ears of the organisation that you work for. So, you must be able to scan the environment within the organisation and the external environments.

This is confirmed by Bowen (2018) who alluded that communicators listen through environmental scanning, surveys, and focus groups. They also measure analytics, segment stakeholders and publics, analyse reams of data, gather internal research, define issues or problems accordingly, and interpret patterns that emerge from their analysis as findings to keep strategic plans moving forward (Bowen, 2018). They create a dialogue with stakeholders, initiate conflict resolution, and implement problem-solving, amongst others as critical activities to strategy creation (an argument parallel to texts on stakeholders, see, e.g., Bowen, 2018; Cheung & Leung, 2016; Farmer, 2018).

### **7.2.3 Being sensitive to secrets on copyright information**

In line with the ethical concerns of the ability to withhold or delay the publication of information, a group strategic communication manager admitted their role of being sensitive to secrets on copyright information. This implies that they avoid divulging confidential information to a competitor:

This, of course, does not include any information that strategically shouldn't be published in the open – I'm talking about KFC or Coca-Cola's secret recipe – things that are fundamental to the ongoing success of a brand or individual.

This sensitivity to secrets on copyright information can perhaps be explained by the fact that practitioners should protect confidential information that gives their organisation a competitive edge. On the other hand, transparency is important with its overriding virtues, such as openness and clarity. This does not suggest giving away business confidentiality however, an organisation should avoid keeping its stakeholders in the dark (Cheung & Lueng, 2016). The lawyers also come to understand that, while “no comments” translates as “we are guilty or trying to hide something” from the public, there are a lot of ways to say very little without compromising legal matters while still appearing responsive to those who seek more information (Tyler, 1997).

#### **7.2.4 Communicating verified information**

Communication fact-based messages are a basic human need (Surdu et al., 2021). Relevant senior leadership should approve the information before SCPs communicate it to the public. A corporate communication manager states this:

Ensure that whatever information is communicated is verified with the relevant technical/information owners within the organisation and that it is approved by the most relevant senior person (CEO/Board, etc.).

In crisis management, practitioners recalled how certain situations forced them to communicate unverified information with the added scrutiny of media coverage, while the internal processes took time. When engaging with bosses or clients, practitioners often seem to turn a blind eye to ethics. One communication agency’s managing director described how:

Most people suffer from the desire to answer a journalist quickly than the internal processes, so that is where the other challenge comes because you are in crisis communication. So, do not rush to make any decision. Sometimes it is better to wait until everything clears up and you have a clear view of what is going on then, you can better manage your colleagues.

As confirmed by Carter (2018), conflicting loyalties are at the core of ethical decisions. Strategic communication practitioners typically aim to disseminate information from CEOs, other organisational executives, etc., as objective and rational (Holtzhausen, 2015). The conflict between legal crisis communication and the balancing of stakeholder interest is constant as communication practitioners resort to delayed communication until the information is verified, as noted below:

We work closely with our management, CEOs, etc., so if you are going to say yes, we know there’s a crisis, but you haven’t spoken to the CEO or your management about the crisis, then you are going to get fired. ...that it is going to be the most accurate and have the entire info for your internal stakeholders first, sometimes you have no choice but just to wait on the board.

Balancing everyone’s interest, for example, legal considerations, leadership, internal stakeholders – particularly in the form of waiting to communicate verified information – impedes the practitioners’ ability to act and counsel amid confusion when management



refuses to listen. What can be created is a level of social impersonality that withers passion and the moral responsibility of individuals. The media accomplish the alienation by creating a mass audience and public opinion that is devoid of individual thoughts and compassion. One of the outcomes of media practice is the normalisation and massification of ideas and thoughts, which further alienates the practitioner as an individual from his or her own ethical responsibility (Holtzhausen, 2015).

## 8. Discussion

This study brought up two research questions about what constitutes ethical communication during a crisis and the roles of strategic communication practitioners in guiding or directing an organisation to consider ethics while communicating with the publics during a crisis. Ethical counsel and advocacy role types were identified in the study, with ten roles that emerged. In agreement with the previous findings, SCPs implement ethical counselling as part of their professional role (Bowen, 2008; Grunig, 2014). Practitioners integrated both teleological (the ethics of consequences) and deontological (the ethics of rules) concepts, which were introduced in the literature (Grunig, 2014).

Firstly, it was found that strategic communication practitioners viewed ethics to supersede profits. As Surdu et al. (2021) alluded, practitioners should be guided by the five principles: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity. During a crisis, humanitarian care is prioritised, although practitioners face obstacles to make this a reality in practice. However, some participants expressed that, in most instances, their loyalty was focused on the relations with clients, legal representatives, journalists, sponsors, employers, or organisations, and not with victims. Disinformation was a traditional tactic in commerce to convey an optimistic corporations' view, securing credibility by obscuring the profit motive in favour of social beneficence claims (Jackson & Moloney, 2019).

Secondly, the principle of communicating facts on what happens during a crisis was an important advocacy role for the common good. Risking everything for the sake of the truth is present in the ethical counsel role type. Matilda (2020:44) postulated that "the principle of truthfulness of information includes the following duties: respecting the truth, avoiding lying, not misleading the public, avoiding exaggeration, explaining, and interpreting information, offering accurate information, and, finally, the duty of rectification". This was expressed by practitioners who believed that the reputation and image of the organisation could be repaired by applying the principle of truthfulness of the information. In most cases, trust and confidence in the company are often debated by leadership and legal professionals. For example, participants highlighted truth-telling with their potential value in crisis communication because they can only reflect the reality of what happened in a crisis that could save the organisation. Although professional codes typically require honesty as a first and foremost standard, many professionals, regardless of their motivation, still find themselves in a conflict with truth-telling (Bowen, 2018).

Farmer (2018:4) argues that “in ethical decision-making, complexity manifests itself in at least three areas: including the ranking of consequences by impact and uncertainty, the balance of interests, and management of the truth and reputation risk”.

This takes us to the third major emerging finding: the analyses have shown that media advancement makes ethics important in addressing dubious practices and normalising organisational lying during a crisis. Telling the truth is a concern for practitioners who fear investigative journalists, who further interrogate the organisation’s statements about the crisis. Investigative media and new technology provide more scope to increase openness and their effect on unethical practice and information, which is distorted or purposely concealed.

Despite the smaller sample, the findings of this study can be compared to some of the recent studies of ethics codes in public relations. Jackson and Moloney (2019) extracted three leading themes from UK PRP’s perspectives and interpretations of ethics: societal responsibilities, truth and lies, and PR ethics and professional bodies. They have also recognised that, while the PRP is frequently positioned in literature as the company’s ethical conscience, in reality, ‘uneasy lies the head that wears a crown’. We discover that in the face of commercial and organisational bosses, many PRPs aspire to an ethical advocacy position but lack agency. The challenge of unethical practice is not challenged as PRPs choose coping strategies. Results confirm Grunig’s (2014) statement that practitioners “serve as ethical counsellors to organisations, a role in which they help organisations behave in ethical, responsible, and sustainable ways”. Practitioners should be a conscience for their organisations. The findings reflect that participants were profoundly involved in determining the social role of an organisation. Before taking action, organisations must attempt to quantify the social impacts of major decisions.

## 9. Conclusion

The exploratory approach that was adopted and the qualitative techniques that were employed led to findings that suggest ethical roles previously not clearly identified through empirical studies. This research explored South African strategic communication practitioners’ experiences and perceptions of ethics, paying particular attention to their views on what constitutes ethical communication and their role as the moral compass of an organisation.

Technology advancement and access to social media increasingly provide opportunities for the public to verify unethical information or behaviour. As a result, there is a growing compulsory acceptance amongst practitioners that ethical communication should be prioritised during a crisis. The findings contribute to the dialogue and offer guidance to strategic communication practitioners on what elements, particularly as a moral agent, promote ethical communication during a crisis. Communication of ethics should be a collective intent of the organisation in that leaders need to carefully define the principles of the organisation in consultation with their governing boards and need to model those values. The actions of leaders, therefore, directly and indirectly, affect the entire

organisation's ethical climate. Listening to practitioners talk about their ethical roles and their view on ethical communication during a crisis is an initial and necessary step in considering these ideas. The findings are significant, but so is the fact that they are written from the viewpoint of strategic communication experts who help complex and diverse organisations. Future studies may consider and refine these ethical roles and suggest others, whether they focus on strategic communication practice and interdisciplinarity in greater depth, make comparisons between communication and other disciplines, or concentrate on a related discipline or set of disciplines.

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# Holding space: Shaping organisational empathy through a collaborative autoethnographic approach

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to understand affective organisational responses, specifically empathy to employees in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach (CAE), we assess a South African public university's empathetic response to employees' work-life integration challenges at the peak of the pandemic. By 'organisational responses' we mean policies and practices enacted by human resource management in the organisational empirical case presented. In so doing, we offer an empirical account of how we as scholar-practitioners helped shape the organisational response to work-life integration, and the opportunities and challenges in doing so. Conceptually, we offer the idea of 'performative empathy' as a lens to analyse organisational behavior. Methodologically, CAE has limited use in South African management studies and our example acts as a prompt to management scholars to further develop its methodologic applications for theory/conceptual building.

The current pandemic has seen a surge of interest by organisations in employee wellness and much visibility has been given to concepts of 'self-care', 'wellness', 'compassionate leadership', organisational empathy, empathetic leadership and the idea of organisational disruption. Less clear to us is the distinction between substantive and performative empathy. By 'performative' we mean that these claims are superficial and not grounded in any authentic practice of empathy, but rather are performance or a simulacrum of empathy. By 'substantive' we mean authentic practices of empathy towards employees that have real world implications in their personal and working lives.



## 2. Organisational empathy

A discussion of performative empathy can only take place within the context of a broader understanding of organisational empathy and its resulting impact on employee wellness strategies. According to Clark, Robertson and Young (2019:171), empathy must be considered a multilevel construct comprised of three discrete dimensions, i.e. “(a) understanding another person’s internal state (cognitive empathy), (b) sharing another person’s affective state (affective empathy), and/or (c) behaviourally demonstrating that one has understood another person’s internal state and/or shared another person’s affective state (behavioural empathy)”. While there are different levels of analysis that can be used to study empathy in organisations ranging from within an employee, between employees, interpersonal interactions, groups, and organisation-wide (Burch, Bennett, Humphrey, Batchelor & Cairo, 2016:173), we specifically focus on ‘organisation-wide’ empathy and apply the definition of empathy quoted above to understand how empathy is embedded in the structure and culture of organisations.

Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) state that the emotional climate of the organisation is reflective of the culture and leadership of the organisation. Empathetic organisations have a culture and climate that promotes employee well-being (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016). However, organisational responses and policies grounded in empathy go further than merely “framing organisations as vehicles for health behaviour promotion” (Garrin, 2014:109). Ultimately, empathy challenges neoliberalised forms of management, offering alternative patterns of leadership and organisational responses that promote affective workplace spaces/environments that result in necessary workplace social support that challenges new managerialist approaches, especially during crises.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Genuine empathy

For Wander (2013) empathy and compassion need to be part of the social fabric of organisations. This means both policy and highly visible actions need to demonstrate that caring for others in the organisation is normative and expected. Empathetic responses therefore need to be incorporated into the mission statements of organisations, and for it to be regarded as an ideal upon which the organisational culture is based (Garrin, 2014).

The literature, as discussed below, suggests that the key drivers of the responses and policies of empathetic organisations include: employee needs, trust (which includes acknowledging employees as human beings rather than merely tools of productivity), and the desire to create community.

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1 While neo-liberalism is a term used when discussing policies designed to shift the states focus from public welfare to policies in favour of capital and the free market, new managerialism is considered the “organisational arm of neo-liberalism” (Lynch, 2014). It is a management system designed to prioritise productivity over people by focusing on performance, rankings, incentives and competition to drive business processes (Lynch, 2014). In addition, it engages in surveillance, monitoring and micro control of staff. Financial controls are centralised to line managers, and a managerial class is created to supervise non-management staff. Efficiencies thus replace relational values (Sewpersad et al., 2019).



### 3.1 Wellness interventions based on employee needs

Clark, Robertson and Young (2019:179) argue that one of the distinctive characteristics of empathy is 'convergence'. When applied to organisations, this implies that the affective state of the organisation is similar to the affective state of employees. In addition, the organisation's perceptions of employees' internal state is the same as employees' perceptions of his or her own internal state thus resulting in congruent organisational responses and behaviours that actively demonstrate empathy (Clark et al., 2019). In this regard, empathetic organisations focus on individual employee needs, acknowledging that their workforce is not homogenous and its members do not experience stress and crises in the same way.

For instance, stay-at-home and work-from-home orders during the global pandemic have shown that while employees are joined by their common vulnerability during this crisis they are unique in their circumstances. While some have the added responsibilities of parenting and home schooling, these families vary in terms of the number of people in the household, number and ages of children, and their living arrangements which include adequacy of housing, as well as access to domestic help. In addition, many employees have taken on caring for elderly and/or sick family members, while some are burdened by lack of access to family or friendship support networks resulting in social isolation. Each of these circumstances requires a specific organisational response and while collective well-being of employees is important, it is equally crucial that individual employee experiences are centred, especially during a crisis. Kossek, Pichler, Bodner and Hammer (2011) argue that the 'form or type' of support that employees receive makes a difference in reducing work-life conflict.

Empathetic organisations therefore, have made it their duty to better understand the individual needs of their workforce to tailor workplace social support that facilitates positive work-family integration. According to Cobb (1976 cited in Kossek et al., 2011:291), workplace social support can be defined as "an individual's belief that she is loved, valued, and her well-being is cared about as part of a social network of mutual obligation". In addition, social support includes the perceptions employees have of their ability to reliably access "helping relationships of varying quality or strength, which provide resources such as communication of information, emotional empathy, or tangible assistance" (Kossek et al., 2011:291). In other words, individual employees in empathetic workplaces know that the organisation and their immediate line management values their well-being and will provide the necessary specific support for their wellness/socio-emotional concerns.

### 3.2 Trust

Work on organisational resilience globally and nationally provide evidence that trust is crucial for organisational success, especially during times of crisis. Empathetic organisations respond to times of crisis with care and concern based on trust and then develop policies. For instance, during the pandemic and resultant lockdown, organisations displayed empathy by redefining what productivity means during crises and/or altering

their expectations of employees during this time. This was done by eliminating or postponing performance reviews, and acknowledging that it was unreasonable to assess performance targets that were put in place before the pandemic (Feder-Stanford, 2020).

Studies have shown that granting employees flexibility with regard to working hours, or autonomy to meet goals results in the perception of the organisation by employees, as supportive and compassionate (Shockley & Allen, 2007). Empathetic organisations engage transparently about trust with colleagues and supervisors and advocate for managerial styles built on trust. Employees feel trusted when others communicate with them with sympathy and empathy. This entails acknowledging the unique challenges experienced by individual employees, the acute mental and emotional stress during crises, and being validated as a human being rather than a human resource. The moments of least trust are felt during remote micromanagement practices. Empathetic organisations practise trust at both macro- and micro-levels of interaction. According to Gilbert, De Winne and Sels (2011), supportive line managers who are seen to represent the organisation, can increase employees' affective commitment and cause employees to view the organisation in turn as supportive and empathetic.

Additionally, organisations that embody empathy have at their foundation an acute awareness of employees as more than just bearers of labour but rather they are perceived and treated as human beings – carriers of experiences and knowledge other than that of being workers (Buckingham & Goodall, 2019). They are valued beyond what they can provide for the enrichment of the organisation. For instance, studies have shown that when supervisors provide work-family support which allows the employee to successfully navigate both home and work life, or empathises with the challenges employees face regarding work-life balance, this is interpreted by employees as care for his/her well-being (Hammer, Kossek, Kent, Bodner & Zimmerman, 2011).

In addition, the most important area of concern of an empathetic organisation, despite productivity goals not being met, is the wellbeing of the employee (Smith, Ng & Ho Cheung Li, 2020). If the employee does not meet a target or a deadline, the assumption of an empathetic leader is that the employee is not the problem but instead the employee has a problem and would thus require a safe space for them to discuss work-life issues, in order for support to be provided to them (Kossek et al., 2011). Empathetic leadership requires acknowledging workers as people, viewing them holistically, providing consideration to their personal lives, and recognising that they have dreams, goals, aspirations, ambitions, insecurities and personal struggles that exist beyond the organisation (Fortier & Albert, 2015). At its core, empathetic leadership does not focus on the bottom line, or productivity gains but is ultimately concerned with the care of the *people* who are responsible for the bottom line.

### 3.3 Creating community

Organisations with a caregiving culture understand that creating community is vital for resilience building in employees. In addition, organisations that value a healthy environment and ones that promote empathy and compassion will actively develop

opportunities to create community for employees, as they recognise that “for most employees, work is an inherently social activity” (Clark et al., 2019:166), in that it functions as an important conduit for ‘interpersonal connectivity’ (Gely & Bierman, 2007:297). This is especially true for employees who do not have opportunities for social interaction outside of the workplace. Work therefore becomes the locus of community ties.

Quarantine and lockdown during the pandemic resulted in social isolation for some employees for whom the workplace was a critical mode of connection, and means of social interaction. Empathetic organisations responded to this by providing employees with innovative methods to maintain this connection remotely. In so doing they created new spaces for engagement, allowing them to cope better with sudden change and increasing uncertainty. According to Jex (1998), when employees feel a sense of community and believe they have more social support in the workplace this results in their psychological and emotional reserves for dealing with work-life stress increasing and their perceptions of stressors decreasing. As Gilbert (2019) notes, “Humans crave connection. Feeling accepted for who you truly are can give you validation and self-worth. Knowing there are people who support you and will be there for you when you’re struggling provides a sense of safety. And knowing you’re needed, that you have a purpose, reminds you that you are valued. Community provides all these qualities and more”. Studies show that communities provide a protective function and that people with social support are happier, live longer and have significantly less mental and physical health issues (see Berkman & Syme, 1979; Ruberman, Weinblatt, Goldberg & Chaudhary, 1984; Ozbay, Johnson, Dimoulas, Morgan, Charney & Southwick, 2007; Umberson & Montez, 2011).

Empathetic organisations understand that creating community provides a sense of belonging, support and purpose to employees and shows them that they are regarded as valuable to the organisation. The ability to adapt and thrive therefore, especially during times of crisis, is dependent on supportive relationships which provide employees with the capacity to cope effectively in spite of adversity.

## 4. Research methodology

### 4.1 The context

The rapid escalation of the pandemic globally and in South Africa and its implications for work practices at universities prompted one of the authors of this article, Author R, to reflect on what it means to work from home as an academic. In May 2020, he wrote an opinion piece for the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) campus newsletter, the UKZNdaba. The piece was called ‘working with home’. It was prompted by the challenges that resonated with him, his friends, and colleagues on an emotional and physical level while working ‘from’ home during a global pandemic. His key argument was that we are no longer working ‘from’ home but rather working ‘with’ home as work-life boundaries blur. Response to the article from the UKZN academic community via

emails and telephone calls showed that the arguments and points raised by Author R were ones that many academics were experiencing in their work-life juggle.

Common across these responses as well as his own experience was the mismatch between the need for organisational empathy and the lived experiences of staff. Adding to the mismatch was the dissonance between the public communication from the university (via an external wellness provider) about the need to self-care and care for others during profound organisational disruption, and actual lived experience 'on the ground'. This provoked thinking about empathy and organisational behaviour which transitioned to discussions with two women colleagues who would subsequently become collaborators on our research team.

Author R was acutely conscious of his identity and privilege as a man, with no children, living in a typically middle class house in a middle class suburb. He had argued that the pandemic placed an additional burden on women working from home, yet he could not speak for women who have a myriad of gendered challenges integrating their work and life that were amplified during the pandemic.

Given the largescale response to the opinion piece, UKZN's HR division contacted him in July 2020 to run what they termed 'training sessions' for university staff to manage work-life integration. Author R was happy to share his expertise. However, he also felt that given the unequal gendered impact of the pandemic on women employees, it would be disingenuous and patriarchal to run these virtual 'training' sessions as a man and also someone who was not a parent. That UKZN HR did not also think this was an issue was a puzzle. Author R subsequently contacted two women academics and colleagues that he knew were experiencing a multitude of work-life challenges as mothers and women. They also were actively working in research in the area from different disciplinary contexts.

## 4.2 Generating the research question and aims

Collectively we agreed that our webinar series should not be performative in nature but be authentic and substantive in its purpose. The design of the webinars therefore needed to reflect the themes that we felt were missing from the university response to employees during the pandemic. An ethic of empathy, care, community building and trust needed to permeate the design of the webinar.

Through a series of online Zoom discussions and WhatsApp messages, the three of us distilled the research questions of what we were trying to answer to:

1. How can we understand the type of organisational empathy deployed by our university during the national pandemic lockdown?
2. How can we design a webinar series on work-life integration that demonstrated the dimensions of real empathy such as care, trust, and community building?

The webinar became a platform to help us answer these questions, by enabling us to:

- ascertain the needs of employees that attended;
- reflect on our own needs and strategies as employee;

- understand whether attendees felt these needs were being responded to in a meaningful way by the organisation; and
- what implementable actions needed to happen to energise employees in terms of agility and resilience during the mandatory work from home period.

### 4.3 Forming the research team

Author P is a sociologist with expertise in understanding larger social relations and how they impact on the individual. Author L is a mother, an adjunct faculty and organisational psychologist, which positionally offers an inter-related perspective of inside and outside the public university. Author R is an industrial sociologist now working in a management school, whose expertise is in human resources and organisational behaviour. As scholar-practitioners, we have first-hand experience of the devastation and disruption of the pandemic on personal and professional lives. Author R has worked for UKZN for 18 years. Author P has worked for UKZN both in human resources and as an academic for 20 years. Author L has a shorter experience of working with UKZN for three years, but has worked extensively as a practitioner in the private sector. Collectively the three of us have deep work experience of the university organisational culture. Author R proposed to UKZN that the three of us run a series of three webinars, at one hour each for UKZN staff. We would draw on our multiple sets of professional expertise and personal experiences to deliver and position the webinars. The experience of collaboratively working together to develop and present the webinars was rich and thick with experiences of what it means to collaborate as researchers, to translate research into meaningful practice to meet ‘grand challenges’ (see Bacq, Geoghegan, Josefy, Stevenson & Williams, 2020) and engage with people who were struggling with work from home. Given the focus on selves, collaboration, critical reflexivity, context consciousness, emotional resonance, the evocative and analytical processes we engaged in, we organically gravitated to a collaborative autoethnographic approach to frame our experience of preparing and hosting the three webinars in August and September 2020.

### 4.4 Research approach

Our study adopted a concurrent collaborative autoethnographic approach (CAE). This means that data was all collected at the same time (over a 6-week period) during the CAE process. Autoethnography as a qualitative form of inquiry has gained much traction in the social sciences. The method is especially popular in education, psychology and sociology scholarship. The approach requires an introspective analysis of the researcher in relation to the social phenomena being researched. There is no positivist ‘objectivity’ or separation between researcher and researched (Norris & Sawyer, 2016). Instead there is critically reflective social dialogue between the self (the Auto) and social actors or phenomena. This dialogue is reflected through the lens of the sociological imagination, mitigating against a fetishisation of the self. In other words, trustworthy and credible autoethnography needs avoid being a self-absorption exercise. It has to show the iterative relationship between the personal world and the public world and show how

this relationship mutually constitutes the other. The ethnography therefore refers to the immersive ways in which the self experiences the context in which they are dialoguing with (Chang et al., 2013; Norris & Sawyer, 2016).

Given the importance and frequency of collaborative work in the social sciences, autoethnography has over the last two decades developed as a collaborative method. Collaborative autoethnography has become increasingly common in framing projects involving more than one researcher. It has developed its own identity as a qualitative approach in the methodology scholarship. Features of CAE such as collaboration, critical reflexivity, the use of the sociological imagination to make sense of the relationship between the personal and public and the practice of studying ourselves as researcher participants made it an appropriate choice of method for our study.

The three of us were both researchers and research participants during a very specific context (context consciousness) of the Covid-19 pandemic at a public university. We engaged in critical self-reflection by making our thoughts, emotions and vulnerabilities visible to each other, the attendees of the webinars and the commissioning HR managers of the university. We reflected on things that happened to us personally and professionally during the first months of the crisis. We shared our views on how Covid-19 is changing our organisational practices and community building. In this way researcher visibility was achieved. As Chang et al. (2013:22) argue: “The researcher is uniquely positioned to interrogate self and simultaneously be able to understand the nuances behind the responses.” We worked as a community of three curating our autobiographical data. Through our combined autoethnographic experience we worked collectively to ‘gain a meaningful understanding of social cultural phenomena’ that we were all experiencing as facilitators of the three series webinar.

#### 4.5 Curating the data

Our data collection consisted of three phases from July to October 2020.

**Phase 1:** Negotiating the proposal Emails, Zoom meetings and WhatsApp messages to each other to discuss the proposal from HRM.

- Written reflections at individual levels and then shared with each other. With vulnerable sharing of our unique lived experiences.

**Phase 2:** The development of the webinar series – sources of data: Emails, WhatsApp messages, Zoom meetings

- Written reflections at individual levels and then shared with each other.
- Pilot of the first webinar series with invited attendees who provided verbal and written feedback.

**Phase 3:** The webinar series – Context

The webinar series was completed virtually using the Zoom video conferencing platform. The webinar series consisted of three one-hour webinars. The webinars were held once a week on a Wednesday morning over three weeks. Participation in the webinar, by



attendees, was voluntary and they could stay as long as they wanted and leave before the webinar ended. The three of us shared facilitation of each webinar. Each session followed a formula: the introduction, a check-in with webinar attendees of actions implemented since the previous webinar – here the facilitators shared the stories of their attempts to shift behaviour. These were vulnerable examples of ‘face-down’ moments. By ‘face-down’ we refer to our moments of struggles and failures when we were not at our best (psychologically or physically) during the pandemic. Given the nature of academic work where our work is for the most part always peer reviewed, we sometimes struggle with vulnerability. The knee-jerk reaction can be defensive rather than dwelling in that moment of vulnerability. However, we know from the work of Brown (2013) for example, that vulnerability is a precursor to creativity. In sharing our vulnerable moments with webinar participants, we were demonstrating that we don’t have to ‘perform strength all the time’. The middle of the webinar structure created the link between each series and then introduced theoretical frameworks. The end of the programme consisted of further honest, real-life sharing of personal pain-points from the facilitators and the webinar attendees.

We used the chat function on Zoom to encourage feedback, activities, polls and questions from webinar attendees. Given the number of attendees and time limits, it would have been unwieldy to manage verbal responses. Attendees were from both the academic and administrative sectors of the university. While each of the three webinars had a specific theme, they were presented as an interconnected, and interactive series. Webinar one, the first in the series, focused on how different personality types respond to stress. Webinar two extended on this theme by focusing on self-care, trust and creating community, and the final webinar titled ‘How to develop adaptive skills to navigate work-life balance’ had as its focus, building resilience as part of a work-life integration strategy. These themes were the organic outcome of phase one and two of our webinar development process. None of the webinars were recorded, since we wanted the virtual space to be safe and judgement free as we felt this would encourage participation and allow for greater authenticity of both us as facilitators and those attending as webinar participants. The interactive space allowed participants to communicate how they were feeling during this crisis while working from home, as well as their responses to the content presented.

The design of the webinars included all sectors of the university. Also invited were friends and family of the facilitators. However there were never more than three friends and/or family at any of the webinars. Nonetheless their presence was important to democratise the space, and show that working with home is an inclusive practice that encompasses the whole employee and not just the part that they bring to work to ‘produce’ a service. Such a format also disrupted the traditional seminar format held at most universities that tend to be shaped by academic protocol.

Our experience of lockdown at home, limited colleague interaction, and no face-to-face student interaction, coupled with the pressure of emergency transition to online teaching and learning, served as boundary conditions, which bounded emotional responses. The webinar series allowed a bounded emotionality of authentic care and concern, which



encouraged the expression of emotions to facilitate community building and personal well-being in the workplace. The three one-hour webinars allowed the facilitators and the webinar participants the option of experiencing an alternative emotional experience, one of care and concern, psychological safety and connected to a community. After each webinar we reflected on our experiences of creating a contextual space of care, concern and creating community.

We took reflective notes as part of this process. Participation at webinars one, two and three were, 50, 90 and 147 respectively. After each session we met with the HRD managers that had commissioned the series for their feedback. Based on this feedback adjustments were made – for example one suggestion was for the use of polls during the sessions. Participants in our webinars were encouraged to provide feedback using the chat function on Zoom. Feedback was initially slow but by the second session the volume of feedback had increased significantly. Feedback was also provided after the sessions via private emails and correspondence from webinar attendees. The parameters and focus of this article however do not allow for the sharing of individual feedback.

#### 4.6 Data analysis

The different corpora of data is vast. It included emails, text messages, Zoom meetings, phone calls, written reflections, webinar attendee feedback, and the iterations of this article from the May to October 2020. The coding of the data was reflexive, iterative, occurred at the individual level then subsequently at the group level. In distilling the data into themes the following emerged:

1. Wellness interventions based on employee needs
  - (Sub-theme) Need for psychological safety
2. Trust
3. Creating community

In arriving and exploring these themes, we then deployed the concept of performative empathy to describe the university's response.

#### 4.7 Trustworthiness of the data

Despite the focus on researcher subjectivity in CAE, there are ways in which we can ensure the trustworthiness of the data and findings.

- The project has a clearly defined time period and research questions. This helps keep the temporal organisation of the data ensuring its focus.
- The participation of three researchers allows for greater inter-coder reliability during the coding process. More opportunities for dissent present themselves making the process richer and not the subjective outcome of an individual.
- The vast corpora of data and different mediums of data allow for triangulation with each other. Therefore self-reflection, group reflection, written reflection and debriefing

after each session, feedback from webinar attendees and benchmarking against trends in the global and national literature was helpful in establishing credibility.

- A danger of poorly conceived CAE is that it can lean towards ‘gossipy’ by implicating others that are not part of the research team. We have avoided this by reporting on our own reflective and analytical processes. All reportage on webinar attendee feedback is anonymous and has been aggregated to common themes.
- We as facilitators informed attendees that the webinar was a safe space for them to speak, and that the webinar or chats would not be recorded or quoted verbatim; we are therefore unable to provide direct quotes.

## 4.8 Limitations

The nature of the research design, the writing process and the organic development of the collaboration amongst the three authors who developed the webinar series means that we can only reflect on our experiences and the experiences of webinar attendees. HR representatives did not participate in the design, development or facilitation of the webinar series and were thus not included as collaborators in the writing up of this CAE. We are therefore unable to offer insights into their own dynamics and reflections professionally and personally during the shift to work from home policies at UKZN.

# 5. Findings and discussion

## 5.1 Theme One: Wellness interventions based on employee needs

The University’s guidance on how wellness should be holistically managed during the lockdown is outsourced to an external provider. The providers’ input consists of weekly emails on practical wellness. This is their sole form of engagement with staff. Staff that require further assistance or guidance have to reach out by phone or email to the wellness provider. The providers’ interventions are generic and not tailor-made to the unique context of a public university. No internal wellness programmes are offered by HRD itself. For example, there is no work-from-home policy or ‘how to’ guide that many other organisations have speedily provided during lockdown to assist employees with telecommuting, or boundary setting to assist with home-life integration. In addition, there was no engagement with staff on whether or not the wellness provider was providing the necessary support needed during this time. With this in mind we wanted to offer practical wellness interventions based on the unique circumstances of our organisation. Additionally, the heterogeneity of our employees’ experiences during this crisis prompted us to see if we could offer tips on mitigating stress and promoting wellness depending on broad personality types.

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised our health literacy as a tool in the prevention of the virus. The starting point for the webinar series was personal mastery literacy. The aim

of starting with personal mastery was to offer awareness and insight into why people may have been reacting or lashing out in response to lockdown. Personal mastery is the process of personal growth and learning where a person constantly expands their ability to create the results in life they truly seek (Senge, 1990:141). The Enneagram framework was offered as a source of personal insight. The model describes nine tendencies to explain patterns of behaviour that are fundamental of human beings (Riso & Hudson, 1996). Each Enneagram type was presented with insights into core personality patterns, traits and defense mechanisms when under pressure, and in stressful situations, for example, the Covid-19 pandemic. Real-life examples were used to highlight the fixations of behavioural characteristic patterns. Developing our insight and capacity to experience, verbalise and share these emotions contribute towards emotional maturity and resilience. With this insight, individuals understand and accept not only themselves, but also others which can lead to more compassionate relationships and improved well-being (De Lassus, 2006). In addition, it allows people to observe and regulate their responses to situations and behaviours so that they are able to communicate and function in society at an optimum level during crises. At our debriefing sessions after each webinar, it became apparent that despite the plethora of news on wellness during the pandemic, webinar attendees struggled with finding interventions that suited their own personalities, ways of working, and their unique lived experiences. The Enneagram thus served as an important tool to assist employees in becoming more self-aware, and to make better behavioural choices as a result.

### **5.1.1 Need for psychological safety**

Psychologically safe environments are those in which staff feel safe to voice ideas, willingly seek feedback, provide honest feedback, collaborate, take risks and experiment, and is one way to overcome such threats to individual and organisational learning. Author P and Author R as permanent academic employees of UKZN did not feel psychologically safe in voicing their ideas and opinions about how it was chronically stressful to make the switch almost overnight to emergency remote teaching. The drive from UKZN to make the switch came with no internal psychological support. Training in how to use new technologies to teach remotely was viewed as support, when it was in fact simply training on how to use new technologies. At the same time student mental health was viewed as a priority by UKZN with extensive (not outsourced) psychological support services being offered. The implicit message, in our opinion, was that staff already had the resilience and agility to make the transition to new ways of working and living when no empirical work by UKZN suggested this. No survey of staff and their needs took place for example, yet multiple demands were made on staff with no recognition of the diversity of challenges that staff faced while working from home. Author P and Author R discussed these feelings and concerns with Author L, who holds a liminal space as an outsider, psychologist and adjunct faculty at the UKZN business school. The purpose of these discussions was to gain insights from Author L about her work with other organisations during the pandemic and what their employee wellness strategies were. It was at this point that psychological safety was raised by Author L as

a necessary condition for flourishing and empathetic organisations. As a result of this collective reflection we wanted our webinar series to be a psychologically safe space for webinar participants and ourselves, given the lack of it in our respective UKZN work environments.

Creating a psychologically safe webinar environment was thus intentionally crafted by facilitators. This was done by assuring webinar attendees of the following: the session would not be recorded, neither would chats using the chat function on Zoom be archived. Attendees could sign on anonymously or anonymise themselves when providing feedback using the chat function (Zoom allows for this functionality). The facilitators also through sharing their own vulnerability at the start of each session signalled to webinar attendees that this was not going to be a traditional 'HR training webinar' type format. For example, facilitators spoke about their spouses, children and their attempts at coping for that week (failed and successful). It was hoped that through this form of authenticity, that attendees would feel 'safer'. The fact that no attendee left any of the three webinars early and that webinar attendance increased significantly every week is one indicator that attendees may have felt safe to attend and participate.

The concept of psychological safety in the learning space is not a new phenomenon (Fowler & Rigby, 1994). Given the Covid-19 Zoom fatigue and the public university setting, we were aware of the importance of creating psychological safety so participants could experience alternate emotional responses. This requires a "safe" environment in which individuals feel they will be taken seriously and not fear retribution and dismissal of their views (Edmondson, 1999).

Edmondson (1999) proposes a definition of psychological safety as the shared belief that the work team offers a safe environment for interpersonal risks and information sharing. Psychological safety is particularly important in an academic environment in which peer-review and critical thinking can lead to some staff feeling insecure, holding back on ideas and staying in their silo. Research has shown that psychological safety is associated with optimal team functioning, proactive team discussions, engagement in behaviours that facilitate a safe environment, increased feelings of security and employee well-being (Kessel, Kratzer & Schultz, 2012). Therefore, a work-place that encourages psychological safety can lead to improved team cohesion and job performance amongst team members (Baer & Frese, 2003). Participants needed a psychologically safe and interactive space to express themselves as well as to 'learn' in. Based on attendee feedback, the use of an external wellness provider did not create this safe and interactive space for UKZN employees to engage in. We acknowledge that other employees who were not present at the series may have had different experiences.

## 5.2 Theme Two: Trust

Trust is at the core of organisational flourishing and agility, yet the organisational response by UKZN as experienced by us was that it worked from the premise of mistrust. This was exemplified in two ways in Author R's experience. Despite profound and global organisational disruptions and an almost universal shift away from performance

contracting, UKZN insisted that performance contracting would continue as normal, even if the contextual situation made the attainment of Key Performance Areas (KPA) impossible. Instruction to complete contracting was persistent and stressful. At the time of writing this article, no dissent or discussion about adapting the process was allowed. However, after pressure from the unions, the university agreed for flexibility to be applied but not for performance management to be removed for 2020. This was ironic given that academic staff successfully completed the first semester (which was eight months long) engaging in a range of activities not captured by the performance management KPAs. For example 80 percent of Author R's work was teaching and supervision remotely. Yet during Author R's performance management contracting, teaching could only count for 45% of his time. Academics earned the trust of management by facilitating the completion of an arduous semester often using their own resources such as data, home schooling children, caring for elderly and sick relatives, and experiencing high levels of anxiety and trauma, yet reciprocation from UKZN is not evident. Author L, given her expertise as a psychologist and her being in senior HRM positions previously, was a sounding board as we engaged weekly on how to understand the organisational response. Author R tried to apply for leave as way of having dedicated time off to process the chronic fatigue of working remotely, anxiety of having a spouse on the frontline of the pandemic and the constant monitoring and surveillance by UKZN of work activities. However, taking leave during the lockdown was viewed as unnecessary, and he felt leave shamed. This was the experience of a number of colleagues at UKZN. Given these experiences, it was essential that our webinar series forefront trust at both the interpersonal and organisational levels.

### **5.2.1 Interpersonal trust**

The trust between the facilitators was necessary to create psychological safety, which allowed participants to engage with the webinar series. The literature reveals that trust between team members and their manager has been shown to promote psychological safety. Within a work context, the development of trust results from a general feeling that the manager demonstrates availability, competence, coherence, discretion, equity, integrity, loyalty, transparency, the fulfilment of promises, and receptivity (Butler, 1991). Therefore, managers have a vital role to play to build and maintain trust to ensure psychological safety to allow staff to flourish and thrive in their work contributions. In the webinar series, we focused on appropriate trust-building actions that would support a remote work environment in a public university context. When participants shared trust-building actions that they had implemented, or experienced from peers and line managers, this created the possibility for the emergence of a culture of care and concern.

### **5.2.2 Organisational trust**

The three of us were and are all involved in work on organisational behaviour. Our completed fieldwork on how organisations are responding to the pandemic revealed that a common and key theme emerging from all our work is that of organisational trust as a measurable and tangible set of actions.

We reflected on organisational trust during the webinar series by incorporating it into our discussions on Self-Care. We highlighted the shame felt by employees who were made to feel “not productive enough” by colleagues or line managers during the pandemic while working from home. We emphasised that ideally, people should not be expected to be productive during a global pandemic and that it was okay to prioritise coping, survival and self-compassion (in the absence of genuine compassionate responses from the organisation). The deceptive notion that everyone is able to be equally productive given their access to the same time schedule as others, means very little when all employees don’t have the same access to resources, finances, and other forms of privilege that allow for some to be more productive than others. Organisations who acknowledge these inequalities are able to adjust their expectations of productivity and may also assist employees during this period to redefine what productivity means during crises. The webinar series thus seized the opportunity to link individual purpose and purpose-led organisations, which impacts employee engagement. This brings implications for how we formulate and implement the Covid-19 care plan. By a Covid-19 care plan we refer to a work organisation’s plan that authentically accounts for employees’ holistic wellbeing, not only the productivity gains derived from increased organisational performance.

As Crosina (2020) suggests: “Crises can be challenging not only because they paralyse workers psychologically by removing a sense of security, but more pragmatically because they undermine workers’ ability to do their jobs and to achieve their goals in the short term.” By being less outcomes-focused and paying more attention to nurturing positive relationships, organisations can achieve the same outcomes. Employees want to feel a sense of stability and purpose during times of high uncertainty (Crosina, 2020). More instrumentally, “positive relationships create space for deeper understanding and trust” (Crosina, 2020).

Human resource managers have to shift their view of employees as resources, like any other commodities. As the pandemic shows, the full dimension and competing identities of human beings impact greatly on organisational success. By building and sustaining positive relationships, not only can trust be built but also so can the business continuity of organisations. These are not mutually incompatible goals.

### 5.3 Theme Three: Creating community

Key to the three of us navigating the pandemic and its impact on our personal and organisational lives was the community that we created amongst the three of us. Shared interests, being open about vulnerabilities, and enquiring about each other’s families helped mitigate the isolation and anomie of working remotely for UKZN. It was important that we encouraged participants to also create their own communities with colleagues from UKZN as a resilience strategy. This was especially crucial for staff who live alone and for whom coming into work was the only form of social interaction that they had. Apart from a few webinars hosted by HR collectively for academics around teaching and learning or for women leaders and women academics, there were no efforts made

generally by HR or in our individual schools implementing and encouraging creative community-building initiatives.

The second webinar focused on creating community, appreciating each person's unique community and understanding that the Zoom time would allow participants to transform the isolation to connectedness. A natural response when crises occur is that people, teams and organisations shut down. This is often a result of efforts to protect limited resources, but it can be isolating and alienating. The core of community building is expanding the shared sense of belonging (Block, 2018). The webinar series itself was designed to create a community during that limited time. Many participants indicated in the webinar that this was the first time that they had felt part of a wider community experiencing similar issues of work with home. As a way to continue with our idea of creating community, we encouraged participants to form their own communities for support and also suggested the idea of check-in buddies, whereby people would check in on each other, rather than relying on official university structures to supply psychological support. Additionally, we approached HR to scale up the webinar series based on attendee feedback.

## 6. Conclusion

The discussion of the above themes shows that focusing on employee needs which include the need for psychological safety, trust and creating community are key dimensions of authentic organisational empathy. We felt that these dimensions were lacking in the UKZN response to employee wellbeing during the pandemic. Subsequently, the opportunity to design a webinar series on work-life integration for UKZN presented itself. It was integral that the series not make the perceived missteps of UKZN by not incorporating elements of organisational empathy.

As we collectively reflect on our personal insights from the webinar series, of particular relevance are three key insights. We are acutely aware that students and staff are unique human beings and there is no 'one size fits all' model to work-life balance, as some people have been in lockdown with young children in under-resourced areas while others have been home-bound in a larger home with access to amenities. Our webinar intervention shows that empathetic collaboration is a key behaviour to develop social capital that moves beyond the performance scorecard. Given that senior members of HR were present throughout the webinar series we would hope that the work we have done can inform HR policy of the institution. This would require an organisation that embodies empathy and values employee well-being as more than just productivity performing units.

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