

# Establishing the viability of an institution ethnography inquiry to diagnose university culture

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**Abstract.** This article proposes an 'institution ethnography inquiry' to establish dominant university culture to unravel hidden censures which have led to a divisive, deceptive and uncivil culture that has disrupted the normative flow of common sense. An integrative synthesis and review summaries were adopted to guide the discussion. To discern the type of culture that exists in these universities, two objectives were adopted; (i) analyze emerging university culture and its implications, and (ii) assess the significance of an institutional ethnography inquiry in extricating emerging university culture. Attributes of governance, leadership and personal traits were found to be fundamental pointers to both existing and emerging university culture. As a requisite for the adoption of this inquiry, four (4) theories were identified, reviewed and synthesized. All the theories revealed that the proposed inquiry had potential benefits to expose new-fangled and unique culture that blemished the academia, as well as the intricacies that surround institutional politics, that have infiltrated academia. Hence, an ethnography inquiry should be embraced and promoted as a mode of inquiry for its latency to unravel dysfunctional culture and tackle such contentious topics. Nonetheless, ethnographers must undergo intensive training in ethnography subtleties to gain superior competencies.

**Keywords:** Academia, university culture, institution ethnography inquiry.

## INTRODUCTION

Universities have traditionally been characterized by three principal measures of culture, including; political, administrative and collegiality, which largely influenced 'the way things are done' in these institutions. Moreover, universities' constituent sub-groups heavily depended on the values, ideologies and various messages regularly conveyed to members (Anderson, 2010; Weinberg and Graham-Smith, 2014). Similarly, the distinctive university characteristics connect strongly with their respective cultures - with goals that are often difficult to measure due to their diverse and multiple roles, ambiguity and the multiplicity of stakeholders that has generated inherent tensions (Birnbaum, 1988). Consequently, given the universities' traditional structures as arenas for professionals with elected leaders, emphasis has been on 'collegial' relationships for enhanced productivity and

quality control on all university functions. The culture of an institution often plays a big role in its stability because its liveliness makes an institution flourish and a unifying medium that integrates and influences its success or failure (Birnbaum, 1988). Yet, the same hyped culture can become an institution's greatest liability after it gets dysfunctional and turns toxic (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). Therefore, in a dynamic and complex setting, the success of a university may not necessarily be determined just by the skills of its leaders, its strategy, structure, or reward systems - that often make up its visible features, rather, it is the invisible quality such as; style, character and ways people relate, that ultimately determine the success of an institution (DeVault, 2014). This invisible force behind the tangibles and observables, therefore, is a strong social energy that moves the people

into action (Wiseman *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, 'culture' is to the organization as 'personality' is to the individual, yet unifying antidote that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization.

### The problem

University operations today are more focused on increased enrolment for improved financial resources, to cope with unprecedented global challenges. In turn, this increase has exacerbated rationalization and management of workload computation, unrealistic work demands, idealistic benchmarking and value for money syndrome instead of reinforcing teamwork, harmony and collegial cooperation (Seidman, 2016). This disconnect has led to staff squabbles – with constant disagreements regarding every shared activity of university undertakings. Yet, these activities have always thrived on collegial cooperation to accomplish multiple university tasks. Instead, some behaviors have emerged, passed on, and persisted – gradually turning into a culture. On the other hand, leadership processes have posed other cultural dimensions. For example, democratically elected leaders have been manipulated by their electorates – with the leaders being held to ransom, while the appointed ones facing inconceivable resistance, scheming and deviance. Such maladjusted cultures, therefore, have affected core university functions such as; research activities, supervision, networking and collaborations (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Namara, 2017). Similarly, academic programs have been negated or approved and then hijacked, peer reviews have been manipulated, career growth (*which is the "life-blood and heart-beat"*), has stifled - leaving staff frustrated and disengaged. Supervision allocation and appointment of examiners have been politicized and staff representation popularized (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Namara, 2017; Daniels *et al.*, 2017). Yet, whereas the culture of students was not the object of this discussion, disputes and unrests therein have become a societal concern (Seidman, 2016). Consequently, the emerging cultures seem obscure and dysfunctional, while leaders remain perplexed with obsolete modes of inquiry that do not yield answers for the prevailing situations. The authors, therefore, propose an ethnography inquiry to salvage universities from obsolete cultures and restore their glory.

### METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach and specifically an integrative synthesis and review summaries were adopted. Madison *et al.* (2017) highly recommend these approaches to handle 'theory-driven' studies that are complex and controversial. Similarly, an integrative synthesis was used to summarize related information for decision-making purposes (Creswell, 2012; Madison *et al.*, 2017). Desk

research, observation and informal consultations heavily guided the development of this discussion. Scholars such as Carter (2012), Blair (2016) and Creswell (2012), recommend a review of numerous theories to ascertain and justify the usage of an 'ethnography inquiry'. Hence, an intensive theoretical review was done to generate a consensus regarding the usage of ethnography inquiry in universities. The following section presents a literature review and a theoretical exploration that support the proposed inquiry.

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

Human interaction in terms of relational, power or exchange has been extensively researched by the advocates of the human relations school of thought, as propounded by Mayo (the 1933). Hence, the selection of an appropriate theoretical orientation for such a complex topic can be potentially challenging and enigmatic. Nonetheless, as a way to explain the importance of using an ethnography inquiry, four (4) theories were identified and projected, not only to explain but to extricate the value of an ethnography inquiry and its suitability to investigate university culture. As Smith recommends, therefore, both article development and research processes, require multiple theories as a basis for justification under an ethnography inquiry. The section below presents a review of four (4) theories that support the application of the proposed inquiry; (1) The Theory of Cultural Determination (2) The Social Theory (3) The actor-network theory, and; (4) The Theory of institutional change.

*The theory of Cultural Determinism* proposed by Franz Boaz (1883-1936), espoused that the culture in which we are raised determines who we are at emotional and behavioral levels (Moore, 2009). Therefore, it is not our 'physically inherited traits', rather our 'culture'. This includes our emotions, our behaviors and even our 'economic and political arrangements'. Hence, the differences in human behavior are not primarily determined by innate biological dispositions, but the result of cultural differences acquired through 'social learning' (Wiseman *et al.*, 2017). Principally, the ideology of 'cultural relativism holds that cultures cannot be objectively ranked as higher or lower, nor better or more correct, because all humans see the world through the lens of their own culture, and judge it according to their own culturally acquired norms (Lewis, 2013; Herbert, 2008). Therefore, individual's activities are determined by their social environment that influences and modifies the society in which they live (Gingrich, 2010). Fundamentally, culture is dynamic because, as soon as new culture manifests, the community or society negates absolute stability (Kaldis, 2013). Hence, not all cultures progress along the same path, nor is any culture primitive, but rather - different (Lewis, 2013). Consequently,

human beings learn through interaction, although each with distinct attributes; e.g. the background, disciplines, aspirations, values, etc. (Tan, 2011; Macionis and Gerber, 2011). According to Macionis and Gerber (2011), there are two versions of cultural determinism (a) the optimistic view and; (b) the pessimistic view. Whereas the '*optimistic*' version places no limits on the abilities of human beings to do or to be whatever they want because there is no universal "right way" of being human. Hence, the proper attitude of an informed human being could only be that of 'tolerance'. On the other hand, the optimistic version postulates that human nature is markedly malleable, and can choose the ways of life they prefer. On the other hand, the '*pessimistic*' version maintains that people are what they are conditioned to be – which leads to behaviorism that locates the causes of human behavior in a realm that is totally beyond human control. Both the 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' versions may be applicable in investigating university culture to explain personality traits and how different people assign different interpretations. The social theory was adopted to explain how existing culture may influence work-related behavior and their overall impact.

*The social theory* proposed by Comte (1798 - 1857), explains the actions and behavior of society as a whole – which encompass sociological, political, and philosophical ideas. The term 'social theory' encompasses ideas about 'how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behaviour, about power and social structure, about gender and ethnicity, about modernity and 'civilization' – and; about revolutions and ideals' (Harrington, 2005). The theory questions why humans inhabit the world the way they do – in terms of power relations in a given society, social structures and norms, as well as examining human interaction, and how this has changed over time - in different cultures, and the tools used to measure those aspects (Seidman, 2016). By intellectualizing the problems and issues of the day, the theory adopts an intellectual stance in their disciplines - although, with some level of legitimation and credibility (DeVault, 2008; Silver, 2003). The social theory seeks to explain and predict the effects of social processes using law-like principles, and typical philosophical questions addressed by how social thinkers center around modernity (Miller, 2014). It is hoped that an ethnography inquiry' could potentially answer these heavy-laden questions - given that the available traditional inquiry options often fall short of the key tenets of the proposed approach. The social theory too fell short in explaining the type of culture inherent in HEIs and how they influence the work relations of the players. Consequently, the actor-network theory was adopted.

*The actor-network theory* proposed by Law and Lodge (1984), is a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory where everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships

(Tierney and Hentschke, 2007; Law, 2009). The theory acknowledges the force of things, recognizing that the work that goes on in our world is performed through human-thing partnerships (Campbell and Gregor, 2002; Latour, 2005). The theory analyzes 'human-things relationships', 'interactions' and 'trajectories' and their direct connections which reveal the uniqueness of the institution as well as universality credentials (Norstedt and Breimo, 2016; Miller, 2014; Law, 2009; Nichols, 2016). The theory has the ability to help researchers discover new institutions, procedures, and concepts capable of collecting and regrouping social relations (McCoy, 2006). Hence, all the above are capable of uncovering different challenges while on the job, in classrooms, or more informally - an array of objects, things, even "stuff" that we call '*material actors*' – which help to perform the pedagogies that happen in these spaces (DeVault, 2008; Guanghua, 2012; Fenwick and Edwards, 2010). Scholars (e.g. Hodder, 2016; Grendler, 2014 and Aiming, 2010), found how realities are generated by networks of diverse entities - where all human and non-human involved in this network are labeled as actors or actants. The constructed network will therefore be determined by the researcher's concern (Law and Singleton, 2012). The theory of institutional change was brought on board to tie up the preceding theoretical discussion.

*The institutional theory* as propounded by Scott (1995) was established on the basis and of deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure, which considers the processes by which structures, including schemes, rules, norms and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior (Kraft *et al.*, 2007). How these elements in an institution are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time; and also how they fall into decline and disuse are the object of the theory. Institutions are multi-faceted, durable, social structures – and made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). These institutions, therefore, are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience and are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning to social life (Silver, 2003). These institutions have enduring cultures that sustain them for survival and sustainability, with a high degree of resilience and composed of cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning to social life (Olson, 2007; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Consequently, because colleges and universities operate within an organizational field where a variety of external constituencies sometimes suggest how institutions should operate, they are defined as institutional organizations (Scott, 2008; DeVault, 2008). Moreover, when institutions operate within the guidelines and accepted notions, external constituents view such institutions as legitimate actors within the field.

## How is university culture different from other cultures?

Globally, universities possess distinctive characteristics, which connect strongly with their respective cultures, but also goals that are unclear and difficult to measure, given their internal and external diverse stakeholders (Birnbaum, 1988). University culture is formed intentionally to facilitate functional decision-making, as all too often it is common to encounter a dysfunctional culture in many areas. Each institution has its unique culture, which develops over time to reflect the institution's identity in two dimensions: '*visible*' and '*invisible*'. The visible dimension of culture is reflected in *the espoused values, philosophy and mission* - while the invisible dimension lies in the *unspoken set of values that guide employees'* actions and perceptions in the institution (Clark, 2001). These two dimensions can further be categorized into '*functional*' and '*dysfunctional*'. While the functional culture may be facilitated by the flawless articulation of institutional vision, mission and values - written or otherwise, dysfunctional culture may stem not only from their internal distortions but also from the relations of an institution with its surroundings (Donoghue, 2008). A university's culture, therefore, refers to the attitudes, values and ways of behaving, which according to Donoghue not only result from the interaction of shared commonalities on campus (e.g. lecturers, researchers and students) but also, those external stakeholders that often infiltrate into the system - whether by design or by default. On the other hand, campus culture is characterized by individuality, academic feature, opening, leading, variety and creativity (Brick, 2009).

Whereas 'academic culture' enhances the construction of campus culture, 'the campus culture conditions and restricts the development of academic culture'. The construction strategies of academic culture and campus culture, therefore, require a university to stick to its mission, enhance cultural confidence and cultural consciousness, integrate culture into the process of talent cultivation, promote cultural development and innovation - making universities distinct (Cipriano, 2011). This distinctive nature of complex interaction, with a high concentration of talented academics, administrators, researchers, as well as students, makes it difficult to maintain the desired culture within a given institution, because every institution attracts specific and perhaps appropriate culture to fit the purpose, which in turn facilitates knowledge creation through teaching and research (Washburn, 2005; Schrecker, 2010), but also collaboration to promote scholarship (Schrecker, 2010; Sawyer *et al.*, 2008). Today, university management has transmuted to survive in the fast global developments - thereby altering the conventional mode of operation that has borne a 'competitive' instead of 'cooperative' values (Rybakova and Damico, 2018). Yet, such competition has

further complicated university operations.

## What is institutional ethnography inquiry?

Developed by Smith in the 1980s, institutional ethnography inquiry (IEI) has since gained prominence and has become a distinctive mode of inquiry that seeks to understand what people do and experience in relation to others (Campbell, 2006). *Epistemologically*, IE is distinguished from other sociological approaches because a people's actions are coordinated with others which makes the approach 'the social' (Crang and Cook, 2007). Accordingly, institutional ethnography is a "sociology for people" - designed to explicate the puzzles of people's everyday lives. People are not the objects of an IE analysis, but rather, the objectified relations of governance that give shape to our lives or social coordination that connect people in various and contradictory ways (Rankin, 2017). *Ontologically*, IE attempts to understand the social in the coordinated activities of actual people at particular historically-situated moments - instead of treating the situation as "out there" to be researched (Falzon, 2009). *Etymologically*, the term ethnography is a combination of the terms 'ethno' and 'graphy' - rooted to the Greek terms '*ethnoi*' meaning 'the other' and '*graphein*' - 'to write' respectively (Campbell, 2010).

## The significance of institutional ethnography

As an innovative approach to research that requires a significant shift in researchers' ordinary habits of thinking, ethnographic studies focus on people's behavior, the way they do things, and how they think. As a method of data collection, this approach also examines the behavior and understands their interpretation of the evidenced behavior (Norstedt and Breimo, 2016). In academia, the approach would aptly unravel the complexity that results from the heterogeneous nature of universities (Maxwell, 2017). The reflexive nature makes IEI a substantial contribution in understanding the social life of humans and express a credible reality (Smith and Turner, 2014). There are two popular forms of ethnography; the '*realist*' and the '*critical*'. Whereas the '*realist ethnography*' is used by cultural anthropologists and reports information in a measured style ostensibly uncontaminated by individual predisposition, political objectives, and judgment, the '*critical ethnography*' advocates for the liberation of groups which may not have a voice or prejudiced (Williams and Rankin, 2015; Taber, 2010). Scholars (e.g. Weisbord, 1978; Aune, 2008; Baszanger and Dodier, 2003; Yin, 2011; Alexander, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Foley, 2002; Markham 1998, 2005; Hine, 2000), explain how ethnographers are at liberty to choose any type developed as disciplines depending on

their units of observation.

### How does ethnography inquiry work?

In order to successfully conduct an ethnographic inquiry, the researcher must live amongst a group/society for a lengthy period to learn about them. Ethnography being predominantly a qualitative inquiry, the most recommended methods include; participant observation, interviews, field notes, site documents and surveys because they are considered variable in uncovering ‘the way things are done’ (Campbell, 2010; Norstedt and Breimo, 2016). Given societal complexities and variations that influence people’s interpretation of the world, ethnography has the potential to interpret these cultural intricacies that prevail in society regarding the people’s understanding (Fetterman, 2010). The researcher needs to determine the type of ethnography and describe concepts early enough for clarity and focus (Sezgin, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman’s, 2009). The investigation must involve very few cases, with sufficient detail to explore social phenomena rather than testing hypotheses (Dewan, 2018). The ethnographer must pay attention to ‘*how people behave in their groups and how they act*’ (Taber, 2010). According to Tummons (2017), three terms communicate the philosophical paradigm and conceptual framework of the approach which include; standpoint, ruling relations, and problematic.

*Standpoint* is an ontological concern where the researcher adopts a standpoint because of its empirical location, where a group of people is positioned, within a complex regime of institutions and governance. This interest includes all the formal and informal things that contribute to the sum of something happening. *Ruling relations*, on the other hand, attempts to find out how social and ruling relations refer to particular practices that ‘activate’ a social world of things happening among people. Conversely, *problematic* –is the central aspect for its importance in the formulation and articulating research issues that express the researcher’s discoveries and descriptions of when knowledge shifts (Williams and Rankin, 2015; Walby, 2013; Tummons, 2017). The researcher should first craft a working set of rules or generalizations as to how the culture-sharing group works as the final product of this analysis. The researcher then identifies appropriate themes, issues and relevant theories to provide an orienting framework (Fetterman, 2009; Smith and Turner, 2014). Equally, there should be evidence to confirm that other scholars had identified similar gaps (Madison *et al.*, 2017). Nonetheless, although there is no harm in advancing “statement of problematic” under this inquiry, especially where the researcher went out with specific concerns, there is no rule that the problem must be included, if there is no specific problematic earlier identified because the purpose

of formulating a problematic is to keep closely aligned with core interest in the social organization of knowledge, especially when individuals under investigation may be differently located in relation to the issues at hand (Smith, 2006; Olson, 2007; Antic and Ceric, 2008). Similarly, the problematic in this kind of inquiry is not ‘the problem’ that needs to be understood as an informant might tell it because ethnographers ‘*do not study problems*’, instead, expressions of ‘different theories or explanations’ which could help the researcher to get closer to a problematic situation that becomes the object of the inquiry (Smith and Turner, 2014; Fang, 2012). Although not the object of the inquiry, problematics are critical ‘heuristic devices’ to support choosing among complex threads and to handle the data. Therefore, the applicability of ethnography, comprehension of relevant theories is extremely critical (Rankin, 2017).

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The motivation for ‘ethnography inquiry’ in academia was derived from (a) researcher’s divergent views on the usage of ‘ethnography inquiry’ in a university setting, and (b) the inability of other research approaches to discern specific university cultures that had infiltrated these ‘sacred’ institutions. The proposal to embrace an ethnography inquiry, therefore, is an attempt to explicitly extricate the situation on the frontline and its outside organizing forces which allows discovery of what may not be questioned or even apparent through other research modalities. Markedly, a university environment is ‘endemic’ with institutional hierarchies and regulations, but also, the multiple stakeholders – that make the field ripe for institutional ethnography inquiry. It is on this basis that we strongly believe that universities would benefit from an institutional ethnographic lens, given its focus on the social organization of roles, including the minutest work relations and work settings therein (Cipriano, 2011; Bernard, 2014; Anderson, 2010; Clark, 2001; Carter, 2016).

#### Significance of culture in academia

Culture is crucial in academia, because the way individuals are organized is determined by different criteria, where each group of institution places individuals in different experiential worlds, and also because culture derives in part, this experience, where each of these groups and institutions, is a potential container for culture which makes the environment in academia even more complex (Tan, 2011). Consequently, the more complex structured the institution is, the more complex will its orientation appear, yet while the norms of any culture should be relevant to all the people within that institution, school or department, it is also true that those norms will

be relevant in different degrees for different individuals – and may not always be supported by all the stakeholders (Rybakova and Damico, 2018). Ironically, whether a specific culture is embraced by the majority or not, it will be sustained because of cultural diffusion – and it is this interesting blend that makes understanding of culture extremely difficult, but also fascinating. Traditionally, the ‘collegial’ culture has been a pillar on which universities thrive for competitive advantage and harmonious atmosphere. Collegiality is also critical because of the interactions that hold the university together and create unique and well-defined chemistry (Cipriano, 2011).

Traditionally, universities are known to be democratic institutions, governed through central bodies, which make universities’ decision-making processes complex and unique (Fetterman, 2010). These governance arrangements have traditionally been entrenched in a collegial model, specifically to promote individual independence of thought and mutual respect among others (Eearman, 2014). Yet, academic culture is shaped by many factors – some of which can be changed, while others might be intractable. Universities hence adapt to their external environments by designing responsive structures and systems, adopting relevant technologies, and developing and harvesting members’ skills and qualities (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). Although a university may be constrained by its environment, it may take several “choices” that collectively define its culture. These choices are sometimes influenced by the philosophy of the university, the values of top management, the traditions of governing bodies and succeeding generations of university leaders (Chen, 2005). Beyond the assumptions held by leaders, their skills, qualities, personal styles and leadership strategies - have a profound impact on university culture. This impact can be positive and transformational that sometimes sends signals for achievement-oriented and cooperative behaviors and thereby creating and reinforcing a constructive culture (Olson, 2007).

However, the reverse can be true - implicitly requiring passive and aggressive behaviors and creating a defensive culture instead (Silver, 2003). Collegiality has for long been embraced for recognizing the unique, complex and pluralistic nature of the concept of shared decision-making, given universities’ loose, ambiguous, and constantly changing nature. It is this uniqueness that faculty are *granted* greater authority and responsibility than most employees in private industry or government services (Cipriano, 2011). While squabbles among academic staff are plausible, the sharp divide between the administrators and the faculty are deplorable, yet effective coordination of university activities requires efforts of all stakeholders to yoke for institutional stability and continuity (Rybakova and Damico, 2018; Anderson, 2010). For the desired culture to evolve and adapt to meet emerging changes, it must be harnessed because these institutions are like ‘living organism’ with the growth

of newly developed programs, new partners, new buildings, new hires, new students, new policies, and of course, new ideas (Donoghue, 2008).

### Emerging cultures in academia

Although some of the callous culture discussed herein may at the same time qualify to be of behavioral nature and habits arising from individual disposition, they often time transit into ‘culture’ that is passed on to newer generations - thereby polluting the entire work environment (Olson, 2007). Ironically, academics are known to be ‘*no nonsense*’ professionals, where ‘kindness is not an *academic thing*’, because they are not trained to be ‘kind’, since that ‘kindness’ is the opposite of ‘*criticism*’. According to Olson, academics are trained to ‘critique’ and not the ‘constructive kind’ and are known for ‘micro-aggressions’, ‘petty rivalries’, ‘sabotage and backbiting’, ‘racism’, ‘misogyny’, ‘ableism’, ‘hominem attacks’, ‘general rudeness’, ‘cruel footnotes and endnotes’ and ‘harsh criticism’ to graduate students. Whereas only a few academics may be fond of such callous behavior, Law and Singleton (2012), explain how the few stronger personalities had an inevitable impact on society’s interpretation than the majority that display normal behavior. Other callous attributes among academics include; writing long emails – while complaining about everything and anything (Tan, 2011; Macionis and Gerber, 2011). Whereas disagreements are acceptable in academia, insulting those that are in disagreement is not tolerable (Rybakova and Damico, 2018). Insidious gossip and whispers of hate and disdain are the order of the day - in the hallways, cafeteria, staff rooms, lobbies, walkways, staff vans, etc. (Tan, 2011; Macionis and Gerber, 2011).

Oftentimes, those in positions of power have taken to harassing those they lead, and vice versa. While some people get ahead in academia and pursue their careers amidst ruthless haters, others persistently frustrate those they lead and end up disengaging their labour (Barsky *et al.* (2011). Whereas this may sound normal, their abrupt quitting may have a ripple effect on the students they supervise and many other university functions they are engaged in. Oddly, those who represent the clever and cruel version of intelligence are often rewarded and extreme nasty behavior often gets reinforced thereby threatening the survival of individuals, teams as well as institutions (Lang *et al.*, 2011). Unfortunately, attempts to encourage those with low ambition in scholarly activities have been frustrated by leaders under the pretext of protection from leadership ‘tyranny’ (Kaguhangire-Barifajio and Nkata, 2021). More recently, a new wave of ‘culture’ of ‘followers’ playing victims and sabotaging their leaders, by attributing their failures to their leaders has become commonplace. Yet, many a time, leaders are often judged before they are heard (Kaguhangire-

Barifaijo and Namara, 2017).

Conversely, the 'elected leaders' are often taken for granted by those who elected them – yet, the appointed ones have been frustrated, sabotaged and destroyed. Similarly, shared responsibilities such as; joint teaching and co-supervision have become areas of contention, leading to other emerging cultural dimensions. It is hoped that only an ethnographic inquiry can uncover such unexplainable comportment.

### Implications of university culture

Whereas organizational culture is the glue that holds organizations together and isn't just one aspect of the game – but the game in itself, universities have been infiltrated by dysfunctional culture – making it difficult for cooperative endeavours (Guanghua, 2012). Dysfunctional culture exhibits markedly lower effectiveness, efficiency, and performance than its peers or in comparison to societal standards (Wiseman *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, although 'knowledge sharing' is critical and fundamental for growth, it may not occur unless actors recognize it as a norm or expected behavior as part of the university's culture, resulting from constructive, passive/aggressive, and aggressive/defensive cultural styles – which lead to dysfunctional or degenerated performance (Nichols *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, culture supports technology adoption, stability and growth; supports quality strategies and academic standards. Culture also determines the success or failure of partnerships and collaborations (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Namara, 2012). Culture can propel joint degree ventures, exchange of staff and students, joint researchers and scholarship. At institutional level, there can be a "fit" of faculty and the prevailing university culture and several important outcomes such as job commitment and retention (Fang, 2012). While 'culture' has been accepted as a "fact of organizational life" and has become an integral aspect of many organizational development programs, the actual method or approach to continuously interrogate how feasible culture emerges and how it can be sustained, has not been unraveled. Similarly, whereas much of the research has focused on descriptors of culture and frequently resulted in dimensions or typologies of culture, certain types of cultures have been associated with either positive or negative outcomes (Agar, 2006). Finally, as the dictum of '*publish*' or '*perish*' gets real, novice scholars have been forced to move out of their 'comfort zones' to identify publishing companies or journals to publish for their career advancement. Unfortunately, the majority have ended up abandoning the idea of publishing, as senior scholars or reviewers 'so to speak' often humiliate them with callous comments. Berg and Seeber (2016), found that potential authors withdraw their intentions after they have been seriously humiliated by the senior scholars

entrusted with the review process, in order to promote their cause.

### Significance of an ethnography inquiry in academia

An ethnographic inquiry has been used by Nichols (2016), Norstedt and Breimo (2016), Tummons (2017) and Walby (2013); and was found to be very instrumental in discerning hidden censures in academia. First, it identifies and analyzes unexpected strictures in situations where a researcher misses unexpected issues. Second, it investigates very complicated and sometimes critical design challenges, thirdly, it helps in gaining a deeper understanding of dominant culture, including relevant domain, group of people, processes and practices, goals and contexts. Fourth, an ethnography inquiry simplifies difficult issues, fifth, its documentation process regarding; the rate, the nature and prevalence of certain behavior – which in turn becomes 'culture' make it even more superior. Correspondingly, an ethnography provides a platform even to the voiceless in their context of operations and allows the researcher to observe specific trends and developments (Fetterman, 2010; Norstedt and Breimo, 2016).

Hence, under this arrangement, the ethnographer can look at the information collected with great care before any explanation is made, so that the conclusion generated from the information reflects the voice and behavior of the people under study. This approach is very advantageous because the researcher focuses on the observation of social practices and interactions to observe a situation without imposing any deductive framework upon it, and to view everything as strange or unique (Guanghua, 2012). Given its convenience, an ethnography allows the collection of information in a university setting, where the research is most likely to be part of the team. This can happen through attending meetings, observing members' reactions in a natural context, in lecture rooms, or during tea and lunch breaks. Unquestionably, therefore, given the nature of grouping in a university setting, an ethnography inquiry has potential significance since it combines research into the world of academia, in their social groupings as professionals and allows the engagement and interpretation of findings. The relationship therefore becomes reciprocal with the plausible linkage of academics that is likely to appeal to the practical side of research – for both researchers and their subjects (Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Amel *et al.*, 2017). Nonetheless, while all universities are bound up with knowledge to some degree, it is the people - whether singly or in groups - who conduct research, supervise, network and teach – which demand some level of collaboration and human interaction (Weinberger and Graham-Smith, 2014). While the knowledge society is characteristically a society in which not merely the use and exchange of knowledge are widely diffused, it is also

a society in which human interaction and other social collaborations take place – that lead to emerging and sometimes colossal cultures that demand a different type of inquiry (Aronowitz, 2000).

In addition, an ethnography allows for a theoretically informed, albeit critical lens to explore why there are large gaps between what is intended to happen (in the policy) and what actually happens in practice in these institutions, but also its potential to provide universities with multiple opportunities, given the current social, cultural and political landscape in these institutions. Adams (2015), Acemoglu *et al.* (2005) and Brennan-Horley *et al.* (2010), have all successfully employed an ethnography and have recommended it for usage educational institutions because of its numerous benefits and its potential in empowering individuals to recognize their positions with regard to the ruling relations. Given its potential to empower individuals to challenge these positions, an ethnography will establish modes and operations of academics, how they relate, how they execute their work, and why some cultures are diminishing while others are emerging. Similarly, it will unravel how students' experience is socially organized and perceived, and why certain behavior that gradually transforms into a culture – emerge (Tummons, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Dysfunctional culture has disrupted harmony and coherence, bred personality conflicts - leading to divisions (ideologically and generationally) and governance gridlock – thereby undermining academics' ability to agree upon or enact coherent planning, which has affected institutional essential business. Similarly, the disagreements on what works and does not work have often affected the university's legitimacy, because people construct and deconstruct knowledge in their everyday life, and are discursive with the capacity to formulate ideas and articulate their meanings. Yet, for fear of descending into the muck, university leaders have deliberately avoided taking conciliatory actions to curtail the dysfunctional culture – leading universities' tacit epistemologies to slide into the 'center of gravity'. That notwithstanding, previously, institutions have attempted to address cultural issues at an institutional level, yet, the construction of culture begins from the 'discipline' rather than where the questionable practice of 'mimicking disciplines' begin. Whatever schisms exist in the discipline or department, therefore, are likely to challenge a harmonious environment, leading to the constant motif that resembled revenge tragedy. Consequently, an institutional ethnography inquiry being proposed sets out to establish the commencement of cultural disparities, given its three major benefits; (i) its potential of uncovering critical issues that expose the dominant culture with the potential to help researchers across a range of different contexts (ii) it is the most superior

insightful tool for the researchers to investigate their standpoint, foregrounding the politics in academia, as well as the ongoing importance of researcher reflexivity, and; (iii) the potential to continue providing a framework for critical and emancipatory inquiry, that might be useful in investigating a wider audience. Hence, ethnography possesses distinctive elements in relation to the way these academics and other staff interact amongst themselves – but also, with different disciplines, fields of study, types of employees, as well as their stakeholders. Hence the proposed inquiry is suitable for a university setting, especially given that researchers are more likely to be insiders who can concurrently collect, analyze and interpret uncontaminated data.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

University leaders should make individual academics know their roles in order to feel an inherent sense of obligation to that role, and avoid ruining their reputations through dysfunctional culture. Similarly, ethnographers should be trained in order to be analytical of the topic from the outset, because once it is pulled off the track at the very beginning of the inquiry, the researcher may not solidify the research setting as fundamentally mysterious. Hence, although significant, the inquiry may not stand alone, therefore, it must be used alongside other research frameworks to problematize its practice in order to attend to its standpoint. Given that some 'entangled' cultures are a result of institutional, conceptual, and theoretical orientations, the authors strongly recommend an ethnography inquiry in the investigation of such complex and dynamic relationships in order to determine predominant cultures that often impede harmonious work relationships, engagement, and productivity. Lastly, the socially organized teams must first be examined from the standpoint of key players to benefit the investigator on numerous aspects that are not yet explored, and the ethnographer must at all cost uphold ethical values to avoid the 'ideological circle' being institutionally captured.

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