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Moral Obliquity in Business Transactions in Sub-Saharan Africa



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Synonyms

Aberration; Asynclitism; Deceptiveness; Deflection moral deviance; Eccentricity; Mental deviation; Moral deviation; Moral turpitude; Murkiness; Mysteriousness; Nebulosity; Nebulousness; Obliqueness; Obscurity; Opacity; Opaqueness

Definitions of Terms

Moral obliquity: Deliberate obscurity of speech or conduct.

Bullshit: Bullshit is empty unclarifiable persuasive talk, which bring about smart's own benefit.

Homophily: Similarity breeds connections and birds of a feather flock together.

Serendipity: The Merriam Webster dictionary defines serendipity as “the faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for.”

Butterfly effect: The Merriam Webster dictionary defines “butterfly effect” as a property of chaotic systems (such as the atmosphere) by which small changes in initial conditions can lead to large-scale and unpredictable variation in the future state of the system.

Self-organization: The Business dictionary defines self-organization as the ability of a system to spontaneously arrange its components or elements in a purposeful (nonrandom) manner, under appropriate conditions but without the help of an external agency. It is as if the system knows how to “do its own thing.” Human communities too display self-organization: in every group a member emerges as the leader (who establishes order and rules) and everybody else follows him or her, usually willingly.

Introduction

The African continent is replete with cases of moral obliquity promulgated by slanted and/or crooked government regimes imbuing the private

sector and the local communities (Ntayi et al. 2012). The Merriam Webster dictionary defines moral obliquity as deviation from moral decency or sound thinking. The most recent cases of moral obliquity in Africa involve the former President of Mauritania, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who was implicated in wrongdoing and detained by the Economic Crimes Police and questioned over alleged slanted business transaction behaviors during his regime as head of state (Bilal Hussein 2019). Although empirical literature on the moral obliquity of leaders in business transactions is sparse, anecdotal evidence suggest that morally oblique regimes in Africa tending to walk the tightrope of presidential succession have started to emerge (e.g., Angola, Mauritania, Libya, Mali, Eritrea, and South Africa). Similar cases of moral obliquity are observed in South Africa during Zuma's regime where government leadership was trapped in morally questionable business conduct and/or behaviors (Mark Gevisser 2019). In one of the cases brought against him, the Constitutional Court of South Africa ordered Zuma to repay some of \$16 million of state funds inappropriately spent during his regime.

It is these anecdotes and many other incidents in Africa which suggest that morally oblique leaders would prefer to avoid the question of succession by remaining in office for the rest of their lives. Despite this observation, the discussion about succession, leadership tenure, and moral obliquity is beyond the scope of this paper. However, since behavior breeds behavior, moral obliquity in state leadership may promote oblique behaviors in economic transactions. This paper uses the homophily theory and complexity theory to discuss an ethnographic case of the Kisenyi Community Market in Kampala, Uganda, and derive a model of ontological variants of moral obliquity with its associated constructs. The ethnographic lens allowed the authors to use induction and enter the market vendors' world and model the realities of moral obliquity. The paper is premised on the fact that today's business transactions are so complex and dynamic often punctuated with incomplete information, which makes it extremely hard for anybody to predict

individual's behavior and make meaningful business connection with any assurance (Kay 2010).

A new stream of research from sub-Saharan Africa revealing the presence of a highly competitive business environment, operating under morally oblique behaviors such as outright theft, cutting corners, altering facts, and dishonoring promises, and lying about certain things in order to protect self-interests has started to emerge (Ntayi et al. 2012). In many business transactions it is extremely hard to draw a distinction between individual's intended target and the "aiming point." Such unclear and morally oblique business behaviors exhibited in a complex and dynamic reality requires theorizing. The theorizing process require unraveling truth by examining persons as they interact with and within their socio-historical settings. Therefore, understanding the "what" and "how" about oblique behavioral phenomenon in such socially constructed reality would require an interpretivist's epistemology constructed from everyday experiences, concepts, and meanings (Blaikie 1993). Surprisingly, interpretivism epistemology has been given less attention by moral obliquity scholars, yet a number of businesses rarely achieve their goals through a direct path, but more commonly through oblique actions (Kay 2012). Kay (2011) suggests that obliquity is the best approach whenever complex systems evolve in an uncertain environment and whenever the effect of our actions depends on the way in which others respond to them.

While extant literature is awash with explanations of ethical behaviors and moral rectitude and their antecedents in a wide variety of business settings, research about what constitutes moral obliquity, the context in which it is enacted, thrives and its explanations in a community market setting is either sparse, anecdotal, and at best speculative. Ntayi et al. (2012) in their attempt to examine unethically questionable behaviors in Ugandan buyer-supplier business transaction revealed the importance of social cohesion in breeding connections that increase the availability of negative social capital which is used to defraud buyers. Although their study suggests that negative social bonding and social distancing operate to facilitate unethical business behavior, their

results fall short of exploring the role of complex adaptive mechanisms in social bonding, social connections, market tactics, and ethical behaviors. Yet, Dehghani, Johnson, Hoover, Sagi, Garten, Parmar, Vaisey, Iliev, and Graham (2016) observe that moral similarities encourage social distancing in terms of how people connect and form associations. In spite of this observation, the types of moral similarities that determine this relationship and their adaptive mechanisms are still unknown. Moreover, due to the nature of these studies and limitations resulting from the participation of human subjects, conclusions from these studies are not easily extensible in the market settings characterized with transactional conflicts. This paper intends to address this gap in literature and to posit that moral oblique behaviors are a result of social similarities and bonding between market vendors resulting in homophily, complex adaptive behaviors, and insatiable market tactics.

The available anecdotes in Uganda indicate that the growth of moral obliquity is a result of decreased religious values in the population, continuous interaction with people who practice the same behavior, unemployment, and poverty (New Vision, 13, September, 2013). However, there is no empirical research to warrant such claims. Instead we see cases of moral oblique behaviors taking place in self-employed populations with seemingly thriving businesses. This seems to suggest that the community market environment provides a fertile ground and/or opportunity for probable benefits of obliquity, thereby creating the need to examine the epistemic variants and antecedents of moral obliquity in business transactions in a naturalistic market setting of the Kisenyi Community Market Traders in Uganda. This paper therefore borrows insights from the theory of homophily and complexity to explain the variants and antecedents of moral obliquity. Homophily theory predicts that people are more likely to interact with individuals similar to themselves in respect to a variety of qualities and characteristics (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 2002). Consistent with Crotty, Felgner, Davies, Glidewell, Villarreal, and Ahmed (2003), the authors use interpretive research paradigm to unearth culturally derived and historically situated

interpretations of the moral oblique social life – world that exists in Kisenyi Market. In this paper we aim at discovering people’s insights, share their meanings, and develop insights about the observed case of Kisenyi market (Bryman 2008). Therefore, we use data from the Kisenyi business transaction case to capture reality and establish an ontological order in which moral obliquity is conceptualized. This case study presents pertinent observations and experiences while in close interaction with some traders in Kisenyi, an urban slum in the southwestern part of Kampala central division. This richer view of moral obliquity is important because our study helps us to gain insight into what needs to be incorporated into the understanding of moral obliquity. If we adopt these theoretically relevant insights, we can better explain moral obliquity in a context of a developing country. The paper deals with questions of how moral obliquity exists, what constitutes it, how it can be grouped, how it is related within a hierarchy of emerging concepts and constructs from the story of the Kisenyi Business Community, and what accounts for its existence.

Experience from the Kisenyi Business Community, Kampala, Uganda

Though located in a slum, the Kisenyi Business Community is situated among the key productive areas of downtown in Kampala, Uganda. Given its close proximity to St. Balikuddembe Market (formerly known as Owino Market, Usafi Market) and even without official routes opened, people in the community thrive on such activities like carrying luggage from one business point to another shouting at the top of their voices local phrases “*fusi-fusi*” which literary means “give way.” The community is a habitat to many Ugandans who migrated from rural areas of Uganda to the capital city, Kampala, in search of employment. The demographics of the area is characterized by the uneducated, educated, old, and children who are forced to work in all sorts of businesses undertakings including selling sweets on the street, food vending, metal works, apparel, artisan services, home goods, and so much more. One cannot fail to locate the market. Known for a large population and a number of criminal gangs in the city,

Kisenyi presents itself as a busy and noisy part of Kampala throughout the day till very late in the night. It is one of the places in Kampala where ladies provide extra grip to their bags and men almost provide fulltime cognitive and physical protection to their pockets with their hands. The area is also home to diverse religious denominations ranging from Islam being the dominant as seen from the hijabs and thwabs worn by men and women, respectively, followed by the mainstream Christianity, evangelicals, and animists. Mainstream Christian young men and women are also seen on the sides trying to preach to whoever cares to listen, while shouts of evangelicals can be heard from a distance. The animists and the traditional healers are also busy performing curious arts, sorcery, and antiques, while all sorts of reptiles like snakes and tortoise can be seen obeying the master's voices. At around 4:00 pm, the Imam is heard from a nearby mosque calling people for prayers. There is an interesting coexistence of religious beliefs. **Daily monitor, Sunday April 7 (2013)**, has described Kisenyi as: *Located just a stone throw away from the city center, Kisenyi paints the picture of a vibrant slum with many small-scale businesses thriving. In the midst of the bustle and hustle that characterizes most streets in Kampala, Kisenyi certainly lives up to this tune, the streets are noisy and crowded. Kisenyi is famous for metal works and grinding mills. To many, it is a place where certainly only the strong hearted can survive. It is one of the dirtiest slums with rubbish and filthy blocked drainage channels marking boundaries of the tarmacked road.*

Being one of the oldest and fastest-changing slums in the country, Kisenyi area has had both permanent and semi-permanent structures with dilapidated iron sheets. Thanks to the transformational efforts of Kampala City Council Authority to replace rusted tin roof buildings by malls, bus terminals, cottage industries, storied commercial, and residential structures. Residents there now boast of having tap water, communal restrooms, tarred connecting roads, street lights, mobile money services, Internet cafés, and you name it. The area is also characterized by some of the worst drainage systems in Uganda which is a

threat to both humans and the environment, which are inextricably linked. To the world, it could easily go for a rough complex zone in a rather peaceful city. With this kind of status in the eyes of a common man, even field tasks like photography to beef-up observations and reporting become tricky unless you have moved with a common dweller in the area or seek permission from a local council (I)[LC1] chairperson who is very hesitant to participate in research.

Upon arrival in Kisenyi Community on 20th January, 2020 at about 3:00 pm, a very lively community was found with the congestion in terms of activity and personnel on site almost compared to a beehive activity. Here the hustle and bustle are real, with thousands of people cooperating in business tasks resulting in inevitable surprises. Every market vendor contributes to the survival and continuity of business transactions by outsourcing product items that they do not possess. The collaborative relationships and the separation of tasks of the market vendors is an interesting survival instinct. I keep my eyes open, not only to avoid being knocked down by the boda-bodas passing by, but also the multitude of people rushing through the area, carrying sack loads on their shoulders and heads.

Both formal and informal sectors converge in this area as seen from the makeshift shops, upcoming arcades, stationary shops, retail and wholesale shops, and a few money lender offices. This market accommodates all kinds of people interacting at many levels of social, cognition, and action domains. This is seen from the dress code – some are in suits, casual dressing, particularly the African fabric for the women who dress casually in socks perhaps to keep their feet away from the rough surface, occasionally with old and worn out aprons and head gears and the conduct of the people in area. While some speak in low tones, others shout at each other and occasionally ragged and or drugged people are seen sniffing aviation fuel from small bottles while some engage in fights. The smell of hemp suddenly engulfs the area and no one seems to care despite the anti-cannabis policies in place.

Much of the language is slang and to fit in, one has to embrace the same. As one might imagine, a

simple effort to twist from the usual to slang makes life easier, thus the shift during this visit started with juts, the common fist bump with potential suppliers and/or sellers. With all micro-businesses running on principals of innovation and focusing on results, the moral rectitude is forgotten. Generally, many businessmen and women exhibited lack of any moral fiber creating a need for proper understanding of the underlying factors behind the dubious deals that the area is known for. Also, children of school-going ages are seen carrying out odd jobs such as collection of plastic bottles and garbage collection in a bid to earn a living. In this case study, the innovation was seen right from the roadside food vending to by fabrication works in various workshops. Of interest was the imitation of designs from various leather suitcases utilizing metal work skills which many of the teams got through apprenticeship. To them, the aspect of grit comes in string if you are to survive in business.

The Business Transaction Experience

In a bid to get the feel of a typical business transaction, interest was taken in the welding and metal fabrication section of the market, given their fascinating skills in innovation. The metal fabricators do not have any form of protective gear save for a few who have sunglasses to protect themselves from the welder's sparks. Uniquely fabricated doors, flower stands, window frames, and gates many of which are made on order are seen on display, however, electricity is illegally connected from the nearby electricity poles which poses a risk to the environment. Sharp sounds from gas metal arc welding machines are a common feature in the area. This sound tends to irritate and disturb the ear depending on the mechanism that generates it. The sounds come from noisy operations and equipment including welding, foundries, pneumatic equipment (e.g., jack hammers, chipping hammers, etc.), machine tools for forming, dividing and metal cutting, and grinders among many others. By the time you traverse the metal fabrication section you will be suffering from noise-induced hearing loss. The sound pressure levels

depend on the total mechanical or electrical energy transformed into acoustical energy.

The most interesting thing is that beneath the filth of Kisenyi Business Community lies ingenuity in its latest form. One can see a variety of nice sight appealing steel products ranging from general fabrication (metal doors and windows, gates, water and fuel tanks, burglar proofing parts, motor vehicle bodies, brick-making machines, moulds, metallic chairs and beds, tables, etc.) to catering and kitchen equipment (popcorn machines, food warmers, ovens, roasters, cook stoves, nut grinders, and fruit juice extractors), forging (customized fabrications, hinges, latches, door and window designs, gate designs, sports tools, and other traditional tools), light machines and auto parts fabrication (tricycles, welding machines, vehicle front and rear protective bars, silencers, etc.), industrial machinery (agro-processing machines, packing machines, etc.), and foundry (cast iron and aluminium spares, some vehicle spare parts spacers, bushes, bolts and nuts, weighing scales, bull bars, saucepans, moulds, etc.). There is an incredible ingenuity that comes with the metal fabrication.

Unique in this area is the pricing format for the goods which takes the form of price discrimination, charged depending on the way customers appear and present themselves. Many customers are ignorant about the market and therefore unable to make informed choices about their products since much of it is either deliberately withheld or the traders also have scarce knowledge about the products, they trade in to the extent that when one asks many questions, the trader asks what you want. The traders take advantage of this ignorance and boldly tell customer to either buy or leave. With no warranty, the traders simply sell you whatever they have and hope you never go back again, although the vendors we visited assured customers their ability to help out with minor repairs in case defects attributed to poor workmanship are detected. While customers consider the price in exchange for the quality of the metal-fabricated products, many traders confess that quality comes secondary when making money.

The moment a customer appears and shows interest in a product item, about five to ten people

come and crowd the area and starts listening to the conversation they are not privy to, ready to give unsolicited advice with a view of either wooing the customer to their side or confusing the customer and in the process steal from them. If you are very critical and observant of the actions of the vendor agents, you can quickly take flight. A customer with a timid personality, frightened by numbers may not easily transact business in such an environment and that may perhaps be one of the reasons why the middle-income class shun these places in preference for the more organized setups like supermarkets. Most of our customers go to the markets credulous of the unethical business practices of the Kisenyi vendors.

Among the group of people who crowded my territory on my arrival to the metal fabrication area was an impressive strikingly smart corpulent young man who introduced himself as “Smart.” He easily won my attention. Authoritatively, he told his colleagues to step aside to which they obliged. Later, a one known as Goddie joined Smart. Goddie was a plump short man with a mean look and unlike smart, he seemed too reserved and conservative. He played an observer role most of the time and occasionally communicated through signs despite the fact that he was not dumb and the people around kept on saying that they (Smart and Goddie) had got their prey. The use of sign language made me uncomfortable but Smart kept on saying that all was well. I later came to know the names of these individuals were not real but pseudo names informed by their character. They were hesitant to divulge their names and advised that those were their “work” names.

Impressed by the ingenuity of their work, I quickly pointed at two finished flower vase stands which I ordered immediately. “Smart” quickly pointed at some already finished stands and price tagged them for a whooping UGX100,000/– which I paid for, on sport without any hustle. When I requested for a receipt, Smart was quick to state that they do not issue receipts. Later on, I came to learn that, Smart was neither the owner nor an employee but had been left behind by the owner to caretake. Refusing to issue receipts was and still is a deliberate attempt to evade taxes and also possibly kill traceability in

case of complaints. No sooner had payments been done than the person who placed the order appeared and got perplexed. The woman yelled at me in local dialect: “*nyabootwalawasi-tandizange?*” literally translated to mean “*Madam where are you taking my flower vase stands?*”. To my consternation, everyone around was unbothered and business continued as if nothing had happened and that is when the reality struck me that I had been cheated. Some of the people who had crowded the area told me to leave because the person I had dealt with had disappeared. However, I insisted that I would not leave the workshop until I got value for my money. You may imagine the kind of commotion I thought would spring up. I quickly stopped and told the claimant that had purchased the same at UGX 100,000/–. Surprisingly, the lady had also bought the same flower vase stand at UGX 60,000/– which she had left behind hoping to return after buying a few foodstuffs. I was left wondering how the woman would have felt had she not found me taking the flower vase stands. Remember, those fabricators do not issue receipts. Meanwhile “Smart” and other people who crowded the workshop at my arrival had disappeared. I painfully handed over the stands to the lady who seemed to have been filled with rage and ready to fight. I then quietly inquired from the remaining young men where Smart had gone. “Goddie” told me to wait until the lady leaves. When she eventually left, Goddie made a hand signal and Smart emerged from one of the temporary structures saying “*mwanademuebad-deetutwala*” literally meaning that “*the woman was going to take us on.*” Smart seemed to have been betrayed by his colleague as he expected me to have left too. I was told that the city was for the “wise.” Those words brought the fact that they were aware that whatever they were doing was wrong but had to survive – breeding the element of *survival perhaps for the shrewdest in action*. It seemed like society had embraced such behavior and everyone was not bothered by what “Smart” had done. It became evident that some people in that community have accepted people as they are in as much as they do not tolerate unacceptable behavior.

Later, I was provided with another flower vase stand as replacement of the ones that had been purchased before and off I went still contemplating on how chanced the two buyers were or how lucky the researcher was that the person that had sold to her the items belonging to another person was actually known and willing to provide an alternative.

Ontological Variants of Moral Obliquity

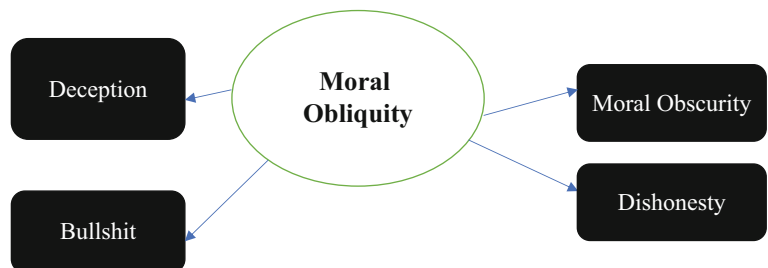
In this section we begin with general observations about the Kisenyi Community Market realities, attempt to probe, evaluate, and deduce the concepts attached to the underlying ideas and move on to the discussion of “impersonal” (passive and reflective) constructions underlying moral oblique metaphors which guide us in generating theoretical justification for the presence of moral obliquity. The reality of the Kisenyi Business Community is taken in order to create a representation of the deviations from moral rectitude hereafter referred to as “moral obliquity.” The derived model of moral obliquity attempts to provide relatively stable general features and axioms of Kisenyi Business Community that are relatively interesting from a scientific point of view. Consistent with the Kisenyi Business Community story, there were multiple actors who demonstrate substantial heterogeneity. The interactions with the traders reveal a significantly diverse community with many people playing different roles to sustain the groups. These agents emerge through organic self-organization and adaption to the norms and customs of the community. The different agents are fully aware of their capabilities and what to pass on to other agents. Figure 1 presents a summary of the ontological variants of moral obliquity which include deception, moral

obscurity, dishonesty, and bullshit as described in subsequent sections.

Deception

The Kisenyi Business Community case reveals the presence of deception. Smart demonstrates his intrinsic intentional capability to dishonestly sell off a metal fabricated flower vase stand to Viola (the unsuspecting customer), which he had already sold to Victoria. Smart carefully crafts and presents persuasive misleading statements through malevolence, irresponsibility, and sloppiness to Viola which results into a sale. Smart tells Viola that most of the items on display are free for sale without raising Viola’s suspicion to the contrary. Smart is proficient in presenting, articulating, and actively closing a sale by misrepresenting the truth and failing to disclose information related to the metal-fabricated flower vase stand sale. Smart sells Victoria’s item to Viola at a cost of US\$28.57 which Viola had acquired from him at a cost of US\$18.57 raising the question of Smart’s moral uprightness (The USD – UGX exchange rate for Thursday 10 September 2020 was 1 USD = 3705 UGX). Smart uses tactics that increases the chances of persuading Viola to buy an already sold item which she would not have done if she had known the tactics. One wonders whether it is morally right to sell someone else’s product for a profit. Smart lacks virtue in so far as receiving more than he ought to, making Viola suffer loss through overpayment. Interestingly, Smart made a deliberate attempt to create an untrue picture in Viola and Victoria with the intention to mislead because of the material benefit he was expecting from the transaction regardless of the effects of his actions on the two customers. Smart gets out of this case neatly because there are

Moral Obliquity in Business Transactions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Fig. 1 Categorizing moral oblique behaviors among market vendors



no punitive measures resulting from his actions of deception. Smart “intentionally distorted facts about the availability of the metal fabrication stand vase” with an aim of instilling a false belief. We see deception manifesting in form of a lie.

The deceptive behavior of Smart braced by his group members present at the metal fabrication workshop is consistent with the works of Tayfun Aykac, Robert Wilken, Frank Jacob, and Nathalie Prime, (2017) who found deception to be a commonly used negotiation tactic in business. Their work reveals that teams use deception by commission (active misrepresentation of preferences) and deception by omission (passive misrepresentation) in business transactions to attain higher negotiation profits than individual negotiators. This revelation partially explains the sudden appearance of certain group of people at the market pretending to be welcoming customers wherever a buyer appears at the market vendors stall, which disappears upon conclusion of a transaction. This is an adaptive mechanism for the market vendors at Kisenyi community market. This is consistent with literature from evolutionary science which considers deception as socially adaptive behaviors employed for survival purposes (Levine 2014; Levine 2019; Thomas and Biro 2020). The case presents Smart, a caretaker of the metal fabrication workshop, assuming its ownership, and knowingly selling an item which had already been bought by another person. His actions clearly show that he was promoting his own selfish interests. Here we appreciate the fact that Smart focuses on his gain when deciding to lie without minding on how much the other party will lose. The price of the flower vase stand was inflated thereby attempting to cheat the customer. Goddie knowing how much Viola would lose, asked her to wait until the first customer leaves to get her a solution. The ensuing discussion has theoretical implications because market deception is a sufficiently complex domain of deception to warrant its distinct research study. Marketplace vendors, customers, regulators, and scholars have differing worldviews based on their cultural backgrounds, values systems, educational backgrounds, and professional training. Customers face emotional difficulties narrating the veracities

of marketplace deception. Whereas some scholars have used a legal lens to interpret market deception, other scholars see the problem through the filter of their disciplines.

Moral Obscurity

The Kisenyi Business community case presents another interesting perspective of the science of being unraveled in obscurity. Smart’s decency, civility, and character in business remain obscure as he conceals information from his customers and misleads them with a hidden intention to defraud. Smart and the members of the metal fabrication workshop conceal, distort, and present confusing information to Viola concerning the sale of the fabricated flower vase stands and yet living for the good should be everyone’s jurisdiction of reason. In reality information for making an informed purchase decision was withheld from Viola and yet being good and truthful in business transactions is important as it promotes reason, justice, and happiness. I must say that the group’s ability to conceal Smart’s intentions and actions from Viola had turned out to be a highly effective stratagem, if Victoria had not found Viola at the workshop on her return. This claim holds water because there is overarching evidence in the case for imputing scheming intentions to Smart and his accomplices. Secondly, Smart has obvious monetary undercurrents attached to his obscurity. The Kisenyi case confirms that desires for the vendors’ money and profits are all more easily and swiftly obtained when one departs from what is most true and good. That is a moral construction one makes when he experiences the reality of the Kisenyi Business practices.

Goodness and truth are at bay at Kisenyi Market since it is an inefficient means to securing joy and happiness of the market vendors. In either case the groups obscurantist actions caused harm and waste to Viola and Victoria. The waste mainly involves the two clients who wasted time in trusting Smart and the workshop instead of enjoying their purchase experience and having a fulfilling shopping experience. The harm occurred when obscurantist information was used as grounds for purchase action. Smart voluntarily falsifies data to manipulate the customer’s

ontological shopping experiences through camouflage. These are a little bit difficult to detect because sellers often act in areas where information is lacking under a mask of good faith. The seller is one who is aware of his bargaining power and uses his position to take advantage of the unsuspecting buyer through obscurantism. These masks of good faith use personal power to infiltrate markets for the sake of material gain/benefit. This gives them ontological leeway to provide guidance to unsuspecting customers and keep them under their yoke. Most prospective customers who are not yet free beings remain in this situation. Not many customers miraculously survive obscurity the way Viola did. Moreover, there are talented fraudsters, and we all know illusionists who have the art of “showing off.” Obscurity uses invented words calculated to hide something real and overcharge in the guise of good and bad negotiation tactics.

Bullshit

The Kisenyi Community Market demonstrates typical bullshit created and circulated by market vendors. Bullshit is empty unclarifiable persuasive talk, which bring about Smart’s own benefit. Smart is “indifferent to how things really are” and “unconcerned with telling the truth” with an intention to mislead (Bullshit), yet truth is the bedrock for the prosperity and survival of business in a competitive environment similar to that of Kisenyi. This case reveals how Smart uses bullshit to conceal, impress, and coerce customers into buying his fabricated metal flower vase stand. Many small businesses in Kisenyi tend to survive on bullshit. This practice is consistent with the findings of Frankfurt (2006), who found bullshit to be a coercive strategy for entrepreneurs in harnessing fear and promote confidence in their perceived belief that they are benefiting from its power. What we see in Kisenyi market is vendors are a reflection of the complex adaptive behaviors in which individuals in the market community self-organize, network, and adapt a business practice that allows vendors to compete and survive in a volatile market environment. From the story, when Smart disappears, Goddie steps in and swings into action and like bees which have the

ability to quickly identify a problem and organize themselves to solve it, the traders too are able to overcome such challenges by working together as a group. Healthy competition between market vendors is visible as they try to woo prospective customers. No wonder bullshit has to be fully embraced as the best coercive strategy in trying to convince customers that they meet the demands of consumers. The Kisenyi business community is a networked environment nested in complex market social network interactions and relationships. During the visit to the community market, one can easily see other vendors in the likes of Smart moving from their stalls to other vendors’ stalls picking items, bringing them over to his/her stalls, and presenting and selling them to customers as their own products. The use of sign language, yet he is not dumb, is a common feature of this market as demonstrated by Goddie. This study reveals some evidence of lying in the use of nonverbal cues, body motions, use of syntax, and contextual cues. These are some of the communication behaviors that one has to watch out for while transacting business in Kisenyi. Such communication patterns are examples of adaptative mechanisms used by the Kisenyi market networks to survive. In this paper, we observe manipulation and cheating of customers as a key feature in the Kisenyi market.

It is not all joyful and rosy getting what you need and want in the Kisenyi market since you have to wade through uncharted waters. As soon as you arrive, vendors and/or dealers suddenly appear from every direction shouting at you calling you aunt, uncle, brother, sister, or Mzee. Before you respond someone will be pulling your hand away and taking you to his/her stall as you are being pushed, pressed, and jolted through the narrow stall corridors. Given the competitive nature of business in the Kisenyi market, bullshit jargons are inevitable in presenting sellers with over inflated image of their products with strategic narrative aimed at selling off products. This is a place where the realities of Bullshit and the “Survival of the fittest” are lived and experienced. Some vendors are looking to make a quick buck and as a result they promise all sorts of things ranging from quality, “unique reputation,”

personalized customer care, solutions oriented, provide beauty, and personal responsibility. By espousing empty buzzwords, market vendors are able to guarantee their customers they are doing the right thing. Goddie acts like he cares much about the fate of the customer and his assurance that something would be done although he belongs to the same group with Smart. He is seen to take charge of the situation.

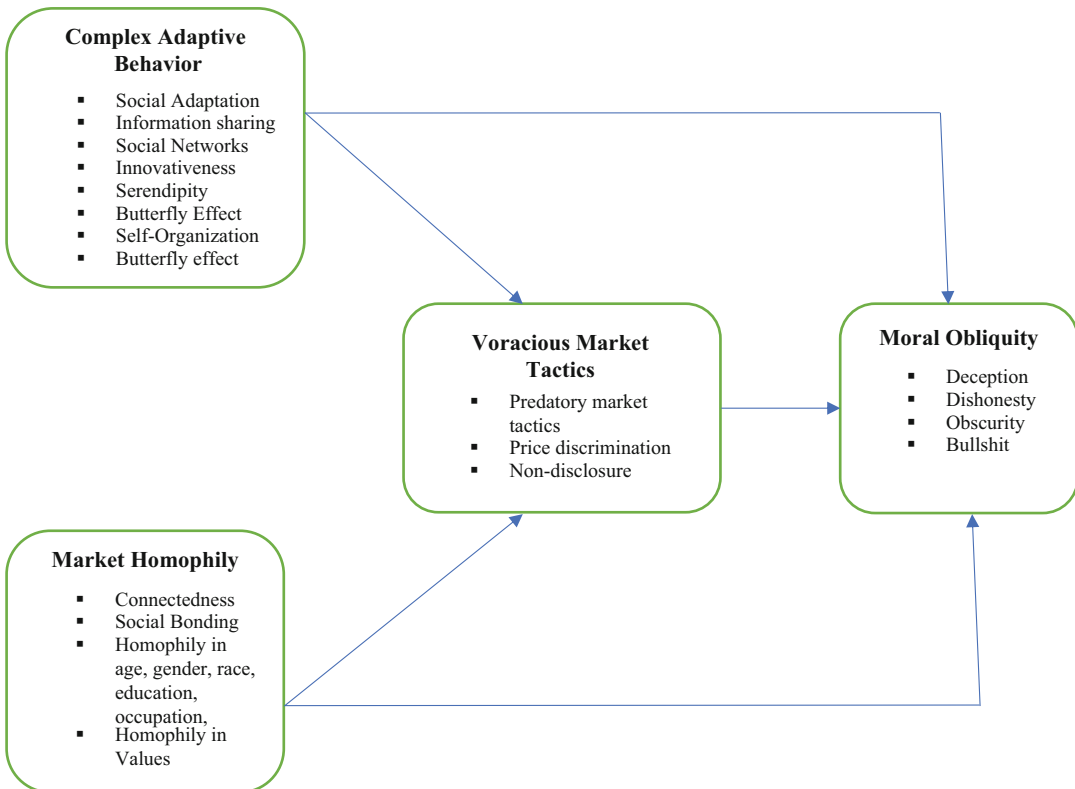
Relationship Patterns Among the Antecedents of Moral Obliquity in Uganda

A number of constructs derived from the story and their relationships are presented in Fig. 2 to form a conceptual framework. This conceptual framework brings together constructs and/or metaphors derived from the homophily theory, the complexity theory, and empirical findings from the literature explaining in part the realities of the moral obliquity story from the Kisenyi Community

market. It is used to show relationships among these ideas and how they relate to moral obliquity.

Market Homophily, Voracious Market Tactics, and Moral Obliquity

Examination of the unfolding events at Kisenyi Community market reveals the presence of strong close contacts (bonds) between market vendors in Kisenyi market. Market vendors share similar qualities, characteristics, and ambitions which tend to provide a social fabric and lubricant for interactions, thereby influencing their level of honesty, trust, deception, obscurity, and bullshit. As seen earlier, market vendors exercise certain forms of greedy behavior which exerts transience on their prey, as they compete for resources, and offer opportunities for their own unsuspecting customers. Their actions are consistent with the theory of homophily which asserts that “Similarity breeds connections” (McPherson et al. 2001,



Moral Obliquity in Business Transactions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Fig. 2 Conceptual framework for moral obliquity variants and antecedents

p. 415) and “birds of a feather flock together” (p. 417). This observation is further supported by Byrne’s (1971) similarity-attraction hypothesis which predicts that people are more likely to interact with those with whom they share similar traits. Market vendors possess network ties developed for information, advice, and resource exchanges that are needed to accomplish their morally oblique market transaction tasks. This is especially true if one analyses how market vendors use their idle time to socialize and engage in idle talk when they do not have customers to serve. The idle time and idle talk enable them to form a strong social bond in order to generate and approve bullshit from peers. This activity which originates from one stall spreads to other stalls in the same market until a butterfly effect is achieved. This unreasoned idle talk is usually attractive, inoffensive, and is intended to promote social relationships among the market vendors in the market. If you want to lose friends and be alienated from market vendors in Kisenyi Market, start questioning bullshit.

Additionally, Kisenyi market is replete with cases of predatory market tactics arising out of existential autonomy of the market vendors. When the market conditions do not allow them to achieve their life meaning, market vendors start searching for a meaning that makes sense to them in form of survival. This may mean exploiting opportunities within themselves with an intention to either deceive or defraud customers. In this case we see a selfish character of the vendors which promotes coercion, wantonness, and volitional division or incoherence. It is not uncommon to find market vendors using phrases like “*a man eateth where he worketh.*” This phrase clearly illustrates the fact that some market vendor will do anything as a means of survival. The ontological account of Smart’s human nature explains his behavior. This behavior is informed by the “short-term gains” mentality and the absence of a sufficient number of good role models in the market communities. From the market side, where Smart was operating from, there were other metal fabricators whose items seemed to be a little more expensive and like many buyers, Viola sought to save some money by taking the cheaper option

which later turned out to be expensive. Smart and group intentionally lowered the prices of their items in a bid to attract customers. This behavior is consistent with Sullivan (1977, p. 111) who observed inter alia that the predator’s conduct is calculated to impose losses on other players.

Complex, Voracious Market Tactics and Moral Obliquity

The Kisenyi vendors invite every prospective customer passing. They quickly profile them before making a decision to attack. After convincing the prospective customers to listen to them, the market vendors decide the time they should spend “handling” him/her before they search for another customer. The market vendors have developed the rules for attack that maximize the long-term material and/or financial gain. Specifically, their model supports them to ignore low-profitability customer types when more profitable customers arrive. This is understandable because they prefer saving the time, they would have taken handling low-profitability clients to search for more profitable clients so as to earn a higher rate of return. Their tactical choices of attack may depend on the state, appearance, and behavior of the prospective customers. Coalitions and alliances existing in Kisenyi market unravel the beehive like activities. A critical look at bees in light of their instinctive partnership qualities reveals how they agree to work together momentarily in a partnership to accomplish a superordinate goal of mutual interest. From the moral accounting perspective of reciprocation, Smart’s actions evoked an obligation on Goddie as displayed by his actions towards Viola. Goddie is forced to exercise fairness on the part of the group for actions of another person. While Smart does not seem to have been penalized, by Goddie, providing an assurance that the situation would be handled was an alert to the members of that community so that such actions would not be tolerated by the customer. From the story we can infer that the businessmen are ready to do whatever it takes to survive. Smart knowing that he could be punished immediately hid.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

The story of Kisenyi Community market reveals that Moral Obliquity in Uganda comprises the following ontological variants: deception, bullshit, moral obscurity, and dishonesty. Such moral oblique behaviors are common in Kisenyi Business Community market. These behaviors are associated with complex adaptive behaviors, market homophily, and voracious market tactics which characterize the business environment in the Kisenyi Community market. The sellers and dealers in this business area do not seem to have governing principles. Everything they do is based on chance and new market vendors are initiated in their social networks and forced to follow similar practices. Additionally, the complex business environment has taught the Kisenyi business community to adapt beehive behaviors, increase levels of connectedness, social bonding, and emotional support which ease the development and spread of moral obliquity among the members of the business community.

Theoretical Implications

The application of Homophily theory (McPherson et al. 2001; Monge et al. 2003) and Complexity theory (Goldstein et al. 2010) to explain moral obliquity at Kisenyi community market in this paper implies that constructs derived from homophily and complexity theory blend to explain moral obliquity in diverse business environments. This means that interactive behaviors among individuals similar to themselves in respect to a variety of qualities and characteristics can explain the concept of moral obliquity in diverse environments. The paper advances the view that interpretive philosophical perspective and case study can be useful in documenting an in-depth understanding of human behavior related to moral obliquity in business communities.

This paper was guided by the interpretive philosophical perspective. The interpretive perspective was preferred because of the desire to have an in-depth understanding of human actions/behavior during business interactions in Kisenyi Market and their relationships with the social

environment. This was deemed necessary because the extent to which individuals deviate from moral rectitude can be objectively assessed through observation and by participating in the activities of the market. Moral reality is objective, constructed by social interaction and internally experienced by market vendors who constitute membership of the Kisenyi Market society (Sarantakos 2013). The paper therefore undertook a task to examine the moral oblique behaviors of market vendors in Kisenyi, how they relate with others and several aspects of their life, such as socioeconomic interactions, their business interaction culture, and history. Ideas from the case were necessary in order to perceive market vendors' action in the context of the whole market system. We used participant observation combined with other unstructured and structured interviews to collect data. Some members of the research team became part of the phenomenon under investigation in order to be able to feel the way people do in that situation. They were actively involved in the market vendors' daily lives. This method allowed the authors of the paper to unearth reality behind moral obliquity and to obtain insights into the market vendors' worldview and social relationships.

Practical Implications

The Kisenyi Community market case unveils the practices of deception, bullshit, dishonesty, and moral obscurity as variants of moral obliquity. This implies that business organizations that are looking towards improving the business environment may need to work towards preventing the spread of such behaviors by working on the antecedent constructs of complex adaptive behavior, market homophily practices, and voracious market tactics as antecedents of moral obliquity in business communities in Uganda.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Moral Responsibility](#)
- ▶ [Wisneski, D., Morgan, G., Bauman, C.](#)

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