Knowledge Management and Sharing in Local Government: A Social Identity Theory Perspective

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Abstract: Service sectors, like local governments, offer various services to assist and develop communities and, as such, society at large. Therefore the interaction between people, knowledge, and technology play a vital role in attaining high service quality, economic development, and growth. Knowledge management (KM) techniques and tools can be applied in local government systems to improve service delivery and create service excellence. In addition a social identity theory perspective could give an indication of how local government officials categorise themselves in their social environment and as a salient group influence KM management and -sharing. The main objective of this paper was to investigate the extent to which social identity theory influences knowledge management and sharing in a South African local government institution. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to obtain data from 22 government officials. The findings highlight some of the issues interlinking KM with self-categorisation, group identity, and local government service delivery improvement, giving a framework for adopting KM in local government.

Keywords: Knowledge management, social identity theory, knowledge sharing, learning organisation, public service, organisational effectiveness

1. Introduction

The swift advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) globally has increased the obtainability, accessibility, and processing of knowledge more than ever before (Ho, Kuo & Lin, 2012; Mannie, van Niekerk & Adendorff, 2013). ICT plays a crucial role in organising (i.e. sharing, collaboration, categorising, and dissemination) and storing of knowledge that can later be retrieved and utilised as meaningful information across different contexts (De Angelis, 2013; Mathew, 2009). Gafoor and Cloete (2010) maintain that knowledge and information can serve as strategic tools in local government, where these institutions can adopt the role of knowledge-based enterprises. Consequently, the unification of local government officials and technology plays a crucial role in achieving high economic development and growth (Bessick & Naicker, 2013; Ho et al., 2012).

Arguably, the challenge to local government in the new economy is to optimise, create, transfer, assemble, protect, and exploit knowledge assets (Bessick & Naicker, 2013; Boder, 2006; De Angelis, 2013; Sharkey, 2006; Xuan, Zhang & Zhang, 2014). These knowledge assets will reinforce its institutional competencies, which, in turn, will strengthen local government's products and services (Gafoor & Cloete, 2010; Meilich, 2005). Thus, the more specialised and specific the knowledge base that the local government uses, the greater its' potential for improved service delivery and competitive advantage (Johanson, Martensson, & Skoog, 2001; Marouf, 2007).

Likewise, the community interacts with its local government officials, resulting in knowledge sharing, where knowledge is deposited, stored, and passed on to the next generation (Lwoga, Ngulube & Stilwell, 2010; Mavodza & Ngulube, 2012). The effective flow of knowledge in this knowledge-sharing process is only possible through appropriate technology and common understanding (Ho et al., 2012; Municipal Institute of Learning, 2010). Local government officials and technology must as such be integrated to achieve the sharing and the consistent flow of knowledge. KM is directly dependent on people and, to a certain extent, on technology (Guston, 2014; Xu, Ramanathan & Ramnath, 2014). Birkinshaw, Nobel, and Riddestrale (cited in Kruger & Johnson, 2013) maintain that the manner in which knowledge is embedded into a system depends on the extent to which knowledge is a function of the social and functional system in which it operates. People and technology are crucial components to the success of KM initiatives.

Concurrent with this view, there must be a sense of social identity and belongingness between organisational members, to enable the effective transfer and sharing of knowledge (Esterhuizen, Schutte & du Toit, 2012). This is also supported by Kane, Argote, and Levine (2005), who argue that individuals will feel more comfortable sharing knowledge with groups with whom they share a social identity. In this case social identity is a person's knowledge that

he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg & Abrams 1988). A social group (local government) is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category.

Against this background, the main objective of this research was to explore the effect of social identity on KM and knowledge sharing in a local government institution. Limited research currently exists on KM in the local government context (Gafoor & Cloete, 2010; Manning et al., 2013). Researchers have also pointed out the lack of consensus regarding measuring KM's success in organisations (Chetty & Mearns, 2012; Kruger & Johnson, 2013; Wamundila & Ngulube, 2011).

This article is structured as follows. First, a literature review is provided, highlighting the application of KM in local government institutions and social identity theory as a method with which to enhance KM. This is followed by a discussion of the research method employed in this study. Flowing from the method, the empirical results of the research are reported. The article concludes with a discussion of the key results and recommendations for both practice and future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge Management in Local Government

KM is an eminent management approach that can be successfully applied across institutional settings through the optimal use of the extensive knowledge present in organisations such as local government institutions (Gafoor & Cloete, 2010; Mavodza & Ngulube, 2012). In particular, the technological era has created the opportunity for local government institutions to embrace the character of a knowledge-based organisation that thrives on the competence of its (people) knowledge workers (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010).

KM appears to provide the most effective method for problem-solving and decision–making, since it has more meaning than data and information (Noman & Aziz, 2011; Sook-Ling, Choo-Kim, Razak, 2013). KM combines information with experience, to show the methods and procedures used by others, which can be reused in the future to solve similar problems (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Baker, Barker, Thorne & Dutnell., 1997). Through the implementation of KM practices, local governments could be transformed towards delivering the best possible services, effective and efficiently (Municipal Institute of Learning, 2010).

Mavoda and Ngulubu (2012, p. 2) define knowledge management as:

> *"A process that enables an organisation to improve its performance by enabling learning and innovation whilst solving its problems, acknowledging and resolving gaps in organisations, and recognising knowledge (comprising people and information) as an organisational asset which has to be managed through enabling policies and institutional tools."*

Consequently KM is of critical importance in maintaining and boosting local government performance and sustainable superior service delivery in today's rapidly transforming global environment (Lai, Hsu, Lin, Chen & Lin, 2014). Through the application of KM, organisations such as local government will be able to makes adjustable processes possible (Mannie et al., 2013; Mogotsi, Boon & Fletcher, 2011). KM allows organisations such as the local government to secure knowledge and convert it into new action repertoires to inform change practices (Ramsey & Barkhuizen, 2011).

According to Cong and Pandya (2003, p. 29), local government needs KM for the following four reasons:
- Firstly, in the knowledge economy, governments are facing increasing competition in terms of service delivery and policy-making, both nationally and internationally, from foreign organisations delivering the same services;
- Secondly, customers demand and receive more customisation from knowledge-oriented organisations, so they expect similar benefits from public service (Local Government);
- Thirdly, the retirement of civil servants and frequent transfers of knowledge workers across government departments create new challenges in the retention of knowledge and safeguarding of institutional memory, hence the need for the training of new staff;
- Finally, jobs today depend more on employees' knowledge than their manual skills.

Subsequently, all these objectives underline the importance of KM in the public sector. The value of KM lies in breaking the barriers that hinder the flow and sharing of knowledge in local government (Akbar, Pilcher & Perrin, 2012). In accordance with Ramsey and Barkhuizen (2011) the possibility of duplication of efforts between departments and divisions can be minimised through KM practices. KM also improves decision-making at local level, as it allows the right knowledge to be received by the right person at the right time, so that he or she is able to make the right decisions (Chetty & Mearns, 2012; Mavodza & Ngulube, 2012).

Consequently a knowledge-sharing culture in organisations such as the local government could be intrinsically good, because of the emerging importance of intellectual capital to organisations, and the need for effective KM practices (see Bessick & Naicker, 2013; De Angelis, 2013). Due to the increasing interdependencies between jobs expectations and the information explosion many local government officials have knowledge (know-how) that could add some value to the institution, if given a chance (Municipal Institute of Learning, 2010; Xuan et al., 2014). Local government institutions that embrace a culture that restrains knowledge-sharing will never be able to create a competitive edge, as knowledge-sharing is believed to be significant in creating and leveraging knowledge assets (Miah, 2010).

Subsequently, a knowledge-sharing culture is thus an imperative for the South African local government institutions, in order to distinguish them as an institution of service (De Angelis, 2013; Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010). Conversely, South African local government institutions should also inculcate a, sense of trust which can contribute to the free exchange of knowledge between committed officials (Kimmerle, Wodzicki & Cress, 2008; Mannie et al., 2013; Mogotsi et al., 2011). Moreover local government should take note that trust develops over time and, as such, should allow for opportunities where knowledge transfer between members can increase (Ho et al., 2012). With the development of an array of knowledge-sharing interactions, local government will decrease their efforts to protect their knowledge and skills. Thus, motivating and committing local government officials to share their knowledge is regarded as critical for successful KM (Davenport & Prusak 1998; Jennex & Olfmann, 2005).

2.2   Applying Social Identity as a Knowledge Management Tool in Local Government

The importance of social identity in the effective management of knowledge in organisations has been well documented (Kimmerle et al., 2008; Willem, Scarbrough & Buelens, 2008). However, a true perspective on the application of social identity as a KM tool in local government is lacking, despite the recognition that KM is increasingly becoming a social activity (Kimmerle et al., 2008).

The search for social identity draws on a collection of existential motives, often referred to in the literature as *organisational behaviour*, which includes searches for meaning, connectedness, empowerment, and immortality (Ho et al., 2012; Kane et al., 2005; Kimmerle et al., 2008). Prentice, Miller, and Lightdale (1994) differentiate between two types of group identities: one based on *common bonds* (attachment to other group members), the other on *common identity* (collective identities). Through social identification and comparison, the individual is argued to vicariously partake in the successes and status of the group (Kane et al., 2005). The individual identifies with social categories, partly to enhance self-esteem (Ho et al., 2012; Kimmerle et al., 2008). This is understandable in view of the relational and comparative nature of social identities. Positive and negative intergroup comparisons, in turn, affect a member's self-esteem (Esterhuizen et al., 2012; Kane et al., 2005).

In agreement with Gaffoor and Cloete, (2010); Mavodza and Ngulube, (2012), the South African local government institutions, collective identification is fundamentally and primarily a statement of categorical membership. Likewise, a collective identity for the South African Local government institutions is one that is shared within local government between departments and members — a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common (Kruger & Johnson, 2013; Mogotsi et al., 2011). Such unity could further be based on recognised characteristics, including knowledge, education, ethnicity, gender, or achieved prestige (Kruger & Johnson, 2013; Mogotsi et al., 2011; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Willem et al., 2008). This also adds to the individual's experience of symbolic capital, as explained by Bourdieu (1993; 1998), which focuses on shared ideas about an individual`s reputation and value as seen by others. Additionally, Bourdieu (1993: 37) describes the concept of symbolic capital as "being known and recognized and is more or less synonymous with: standing, good name, honour, fame, prestige and reputation."

Research on the knowledge-based view of organisations, and in this case, local government, also suggests that social networks facilitate the creation of new knowledge within organisations (e.g., Kogut & Zander, 1992; Tsai, 2000). Through the development of departmental network links, horizontal transfer of knowledge broadens local

government learning. As Huber (1991) suggested, local government as a learning organisation is characterised by motivated units that are intimately connected to one another. By linking different units together, a network arrangement provides a flexible learning structure that replaces old hierarchical structures. Additionally, socio-cultural accounts of knowledge and South African local government institutions at large hinge on the relationship between individual learning and social identity (Mannie et al., 2013; Mogotsi et al., 2011).

As a result, learning is inevitably implicated in the gaining of knowledge, but it is also implicated in the acquisition of identity (Kane et al', 2005; Willem et al., 2008). Applied within the South African local government context, learning involves the transfer of knowledge amongst the different municipal divisions (Municipal Institute of Learning, 2010; Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010; Mannie et al., 2013). Such knowledge transfer occurs in a shared social context in which the different divisions are linked to one another. The local government institutions are rooted in a network coordinated through processes of knowledge transfer and resource sharing (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010; Municipal Institute of Learning, 2010). Accordingly, these networks of interdepartmental links enable the South African local government`s different divisions to gain critical competencies that contribute to their competitiveness in the marketplace, as well as improved service delivery. Subsequently, interdepartmental links and networks are an important part of the South African local government's learning process, in which the divisions and or units discover new opportunities and obtain new knowledge through interacting with one another. An important aspect of learning, is not only the acquisition of facts about the world and or local government; it also involves achieving the ability to act in the world in socially recognised ways (De Angelis, 2013; Ho et al., 2012).

Against the preceding background, this study tested five research propositions:

P 1: Individual and group affiliation lead directly to a stronger sense of belonging.

P 2: Good knowledge governance by South African local government institutions will lead to sound reputation and value seen by others.

P 3: Shared experiences lead directly to an increase in shared knowledge.

P 4: Organisational commitment results in enhanced knowledge sharing.

P 5: Personal and meaningful knowledge creation and sharing is a key driver of the establishment of social structures.

3. Research Design

This research followed a qualitative approach. Nieuwenhuis (2007) maintains that qualitative research is an endeavour to understand the social and cultural contexts that form the basis of numerous behavioural patterns and methods of data generation and analysis. Moreover, as argued by Patton (2005), qualitative research allows for inquiry into a number of issues in great depth, with careful attention to detail and context. In addition, qualitative data collection is not forced by fixed analytical categories, and Patton (2005) further maintains that case studies, as in this case, permit selecting information-rich cases, such as local government. The present study's analysis of the case of local government involved classifying the data through an in-depth study. Hence, the case study approach to qualitative analysis comprised a specific way of collecting, organising, and analysing data to gather comprehensive, systematic, in-depth information about the local government under inquiry (Patton, 2005).

In addition, this research was also informed by the constructionism epistemology research paradigm. This research constructionism allowed the researcher to explore the views of the different participants within the subject context — local government — through the lens of social identity theory and its impact on KM, acknowledging that each participant might have a different view or understanding of the same situation, and that truth or reality exists only through interaction with the realities of the world (Levy & Henry, 2003). This research also followed an interpretive research approach. Interpretive research assumes that people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them, and interpretive researchers thus attempt to understand phenomena by accessing the meanings participants assign to these (Myers, 1997).

3.1 Data Collection

Data were collected by means of five interactive focus group sessions over five days. The focus group sessions allowed the respondents to engage in a guided discussion that enabled the researcher to question, systematically and simultaneously, the defined area of interest, namely KM and social identity (Woodring, Foley, Rado, Brown & Hamner, 2006).

3.2 Sampling

The research participants were councillors and executives (N=22) representative of a local government institution situated in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. This institution is classified as a category B municipality and responsible for rendering municipal services to the community and the neighbouring towns. The Municipal Structures Amendment Act of 2000 acknowledges the weaknesses of local municipalities (B) in terms of infrastructural development, bulk supply and services (Mabille & Barkhuizen, 2013). Subsequently, we belief that, effective knowledge management practices will contribute significantly towards a establishing a service performance culture in local government. The majority of the participants were male (15) and predominantly representative of the black ethnic groups (21). All participants were employed at senior management level. The participants in the municipality who were focused on in this research were the mayor, the Municipal Manager, his executives (N=5), and all councillors (N=15). Permission was obtained from the director of the municipality to execute the study. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the execution of the study. Confidentiality was maintained at all times.

3.3 Data Analyses

Content analyses were applied with the aim of obtaining a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon as well as the concepts and categories describing a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngas (2008). Firstly, the analysis started off with a process of tidying up the information collected, whereby the data collected was categorised. Secondly the data was analysed to identify themes and sub-themes. This process was a good method of creating an initial framework to attach an analysis of the research outcomes. Content analyses thus can show how data can be analysed in a systematic way and scientific rigour manner (Thyme, Wiberg, Lundberg & Graneham, 2013).

4. Findings and discussion

Five main themes emerged from the thematic analyses:
- Social epistemology – Social identity (1),
- Symbolic capital, (2)
- Knowledge sharing, (3),
- Knowledge distribution networks (4) and
- Customer-focused knowledge management (5)

The findings relating to each main theme are discussed in the ensuing session, and substantiated by direct quotes of the participants.

4.1 Theme 1: Social epistemology – Social identity

From the interviews and focus group sessions, it was evident that the executives acknowledge the role of social identity and social categorisation as an important factor to be taken into consideration in instituting the local municipality as a knowledge-based organisation. As mentioned by some of the participants:

We must acknowledge that the local government is an entity and a social/group; therefore, if one fails we all fail…doing so requires us as local government officials and executives to live our local municipality's values, beliefs, and uniqueness. Understanding that we all are part of a social group and, as such, call ourselves public servants is much deeper than I thought…

(Participant 5)

and

I also realised that, as a social group, the local government's social identity develops through a process of learning and influence, and this affects my understanding of what it means to be a member of a group within the local government.

(Participant 11)

and

As a municipality we do things differently than other municipalities and, as such, is our organisational identity strongly linked to our municipality's organisational culture because we have our own symbols, rituals, and local meanings, which serve as our municipality's 'internal figurative context.

(Participant 1)

Within the local government setting, the social identity theory holds that the local government consists of a social group interacting with each other and, as such, form a collective identity as a basis for their motivation (see Esterhuizen et al., 2013; Kane et al., 2005; Kruger & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, social identity is the individual's and, in this case, the local government's officials' self-concept is derived from their apparent membership of the local government as a social group. Social identity occurs from the local government's officials' unique attributes as accepted by their respective communities, or a group in which that individual holds membership within a local municipality (Lwoga et al., 2010; Mavodza & Ngulube, 2012). Subsequently, the noticeable characteristics of the social categorisations that take place within this entity are that officials have strong beliefs about themselves, their worthiness, and affiliations, and so on, as they carry multiple identities and recognise other officials within the local government in multiple ways, based on their inner psychological categorisations.

Thus, for these reasons, the underlying belief systems of social categorisation need to be understood by the local government, in order to design appropriate motivational practices to match each individual's inner self with motivational practices in the local government. Subsequently, the local government as a social entity, characterised by dynamically discontinuous change, requires of the municipality to reconceptualise its KM systems as they have been applied and appreciated in the information systems tradition and research. As a relatively new and transforming local government, executives need to take cognisance of the fact that change is a key aspect of any learning ontology, since human learning induces change in the social world, be it a change in knowledge, structure, attitude, or the identity of the learner. The local government needs to examine the social processes that inform members' learning and, as such, KM processes. The municipality as a socio-cultural entity; change and learning are complex, and change is linked to identity construction and transformation (De Angelis, 2013).

The above findings confirm Research Proposition 1, namely that individual and group affiliations lead directly to a stronger sense of belonging. This is strengthened by the social identity theory, which asserts that local government officials as different groups of people create in-group/self-categorisation and development in ways that favour the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Once having been categorised, local government officials seek to achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from a comparison out-group in terms of some respected aspects. This search for positive distinctiveness means that their sense of who they are as a local government is defined in terms of 'we' rather than 'I.'

4.2   Theme 2: Symbolic capital

The second theme of this research was related to symbolic capital. This was mentioned by some of the participants:

As local government leaders we are constantly faced with the reality of who we are we as a public service, what is our role and contribution to society and our purpose...

(Participant 9)

and

The community expect us as underwritten in our constitution to live up to the values and beliefs and create a balance between the public service's core competencies discover both knowable and unknown public service expectations.

(Participant 20)

and

Understanding our role as strategic leaders and the public service's local context and members' expectations...understanding local community needs and dealing with issues of organisational culture are also important issues for strategic leaders.

(Participant 2)

Symbolic capital, as explained by Bourdieu (1993; 1998) shares ideas around an individual's reputation and value as seen by others. However, this value, and the power that goes along with this appraisal by others, is shaped over time. As a result, it would be important for the local government to understand that their symbolic capital is expressed through their function of connecting ability derive from their reputation, and can consist of economic, social, or cultural capital. With reference to KM and knowledge sharing, the local government needs to know and understand what their communities think about the local government and its status. This will influence the way in which the communities share ideas and information with the local government and its officials (Chetty & Mearns, 2012). Moreover, an imperative aspect for the local government, as Bourdieu deliberated, is that the accumulation of

symbolic capital is just as 'rational' as the gathering of economic capital, particularly since such capital may be freely converted from one form to another, ultimately in order to gain advantages in the form of additional wealth, power, allies, and partnerships.

The above findings confirm Research Proposition 2, namely that good knowledge governance will lead to sound a reputation and value as seen by others. For the local government to apply knowledge governance mechanisms require the South African local government to set up governance systems that ease efforts of sharing, incorporating, and creating knowledge. Furthermore for the local government, knowledge governance signifies the setup of governance structures to maximize the net benefits from processes of transferring, sharing, and creating knowledge.

4.3 Theme 3: Knowledge sharing

The third theme of this research related to knowledge sharing. The local government focus group members stated that, due to the fragile stage of our democracy, most of our local governments are perceived as being firmly antagonistic to knowledge sharing (Municipal Institute of Learning, 2010). They also acknowledged that, in this type of culture, knowledge is equated to power, which has led to information hoarding being the norm. They also revealed that there is insufficient knowledge sharing between the local government and other spheres of government, and the feeling is that management operates on a need-to-know basis and actively promotes a culture of secrecy (Mannie et al. 2013). They felt that the challenge for them as local government leaders is to move from such an unhealthy culture to one that actively encourages and facilitates knowledge sharing, and discourages antagonistic thinking and behaviours, as mentioned by some of the participants:

> *I found out that it is very important to understand that, as a local government, we are one entity, and known by others for what we do and stand for,*

(Participant 1)

and

> *so it is very important for us to understand our organisational culture, the symbols that we employ within local government, the slogans we utter in our conversations and communication, members' way of operating, and their relationship with each other.*

(Participant 13)

and

> *That is very, very important to develop this understanding for understanding knowledge management and sharing within our local setting… because what goes in one department as a form of sub-culture may be difficult in another department, because of the members' value sharing and understanding of their value contribution towards the community… so one really has to understand where the people are coming from. …we sometimes found that, what we sometimes think and do as public service officials is not that well accepted by the public…and that it sometimes takes time to win the confidence of the public.*

(Participant 8)

These findings confirm the above proposition, namely that engaged and or shared experiences lead directly to an increase in sharing knowledge.

4.4 Theme 4: Knowledge distribution networks

The fourth theme that was identified related to knowledge distribution networks and the commitment of individuals and groups to enhancing knowledge sharing. As mentioned by some of the participants:

> *the normal practice within local government is to rotate workers across and between departments, in order for civil servants to become multi-skilled… this practice can lead to sub-optimal performance, not only at the level of the individual, but also by local government, and should be called into question*

(Participant 19)

Furthermore, many highly committed and skilled staff members are currently struggling to meet the high standards demanded of good corporate governance and service delivery, because of staff turnaround issues. As mentioned by one of the participants…

> *We have to go through a knowledge sharing and transfer process on several key organisational processes shortly before the subject matter expert was transferred. Two months later, the only other person with a working knowledge of key processes left the department, leaving newly transferred staff with a steep learning curve to grasp the key processes.*

Sharing and distribution of knowledge is considered by scholars and researchers as the most important aspect of the KM process in any organisation. In addition, effective KM creates a competitive advantage for the organisation. Subsequently, within the local government, the knowledge is shared among the officials within the operational sections and others departments, strengthening local government knowledge construction. As such it is important that, within the local government, operational departments have their own responsibility regarding knowledge flow, transfer, and processes (see Bessick & Naicker, 2013; De Angelis, 2013).

Moreover, the key objective of knowledge sharing within the local government should be to examine the current knowledge and generate new knowledge to enable organisational learning. The executive team of the local government should inspire and establish a knowledge-sharing culture within the local government, which will make a major contribution to knowledge processes and determine the knowledge flow. KM can be established by putting together the correct content, and distributing it to the right people, who can make use of it at the right time. Furthermore, it would be important for the executive team to understand that, if they want to establish a KM system within the local government, it should comprise an integration of organisational elements such as organisational culture, organisational information technology infrastructure, and the local government's repository of individual and collective experiences, learning, insights, values, etc.

In addition for the local government to perform is, to some degree, a product of obtaining the right information to solve unique, challenging problems at the local level. In the search for information, consistent and secure networks might promote the reliable norms, trust, and cooperation that motivate officials to share knowledge. The above findings confirm Research Proposition 4, namely that organisational commitment results in enhanced knowledge sharing (see Hackett 2000; Sambamnurthy & Subramani 2005).

4.5 Theme 5: Customer-focused knowledge management

The final theme highlighted the importance of personal and meaningful knowledge creation to establish structures to serve customer needs. As mentioned by one of the participants:

We are here to serve; it does not matter to which political party we belong at the end, we all need to serve our community and we must do it as a team, sharing and assisting each other...

(Participant 3)

and

Our community voted for us, and they expect us to deliver a service and provide them with basic services as a local government. We cannot allow that our differences keep us to deliver a quality service to our customers.

(Participant 15)

Within the local government context, their customers become aware of the different socio-demographic groups to which they belong, and this consciousness has a significant influence on their buying and service access behaviour (see Mannie et al., 2013; Mogotsi et al., 2011). Hence, the local government community members would be attracted to those products, brands, and services that are linked to their social identity. Moreover, the local government needs to be reminded that their respective communities are prone to social identity-based preferences, which are often reflected in their behaviour, and might lead to demonstrations of dissatisfaction (Chetty & Mearns, 2012; Ho et al., 2012). Nevertheless, is it important for the local government to position its products and services to better reflect the social identity features of their respective communities as valued customers (Bessick & Naicker, 2013; Mavodza & Ngulube, 2012). This positioning task becomes harder for local governments companies who need to serve different constituencies, as they face an additional threat of party politics that shifts social identities to a national identity, and thus affects service decisions.

The above findings confirm Research Proposition 5, namely that personal and meaningful knowledge creation is a key driver of the establishment of social structures.

4.6 Towards an integrated framework for knowledge management and social identity in the local government institution

The above findings led to the development of an integrated framework for social identity theory and KM as well as local government service outcomes (see Figure 1, below). The researchers adopted multi-level interconnected perspectives that the South African local government executive team needs to take into consideration in establishing a better KM and knowledge sharing service delivery institution. It is important to note that these premises are in continuous interaction with each other, and also influence each other. We believe that the local government has to take cognisance of all these premises in order to implement KM principles and achieve subsequent organisational effectiveness.
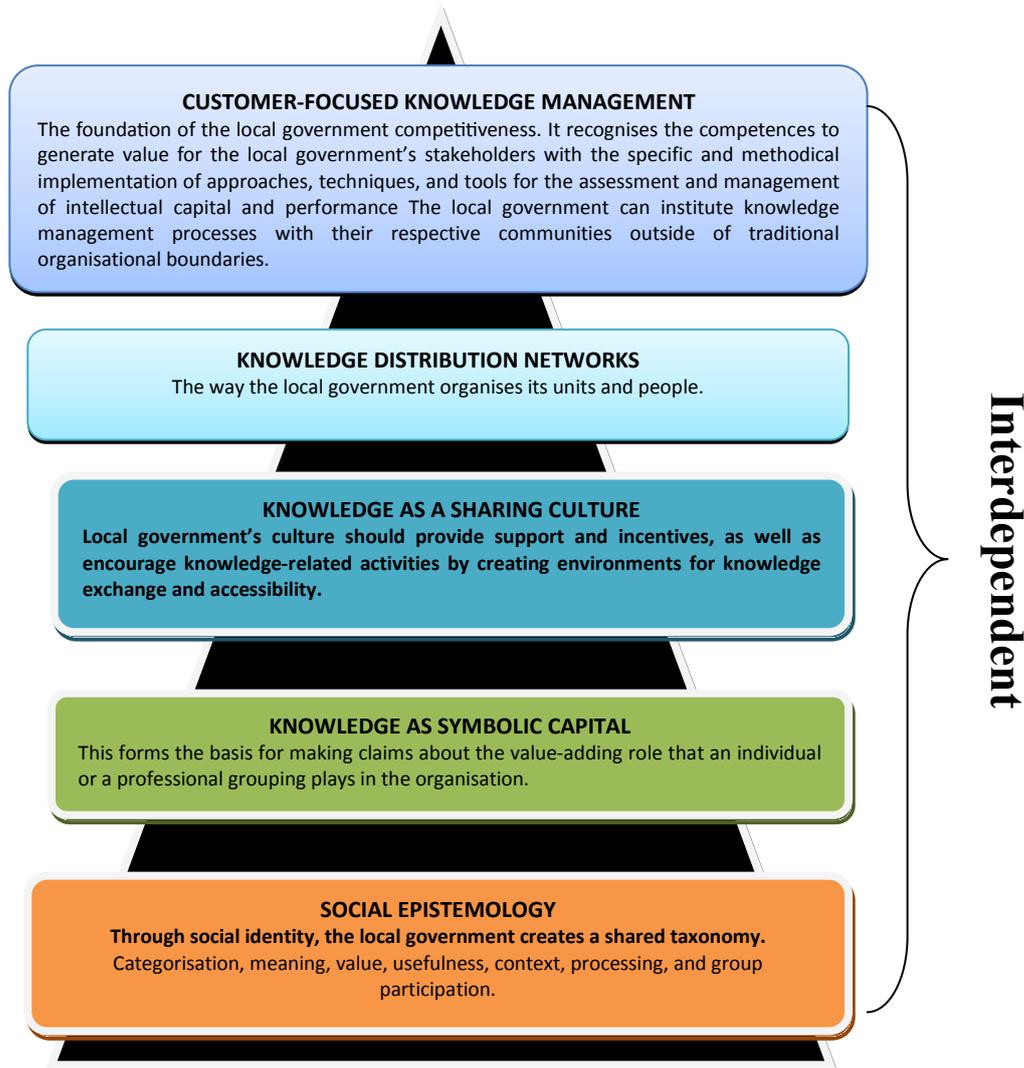
As previously stated, it is acknowledged by scholars and practitioners that knowledge has become the driving force of organisations worldwide towards a competitive edge. Effectively dealing with this dynamism would support the local government in establishing a competitive advantage by steering the resources and people's know-how to achieve effective service delivery. Subsequently, the local government could, as suggested, employ KM as a systematic social identity approach to managing and leveraging their local knowledge asset, which might include knowledge of their customers, products, environment, processes, finances, and personal services.

KM must be a systematic methodology that combines the ability of the local government's resources and intellectual capital, and is also supported by several techniques of knowledge sharing as a consequence of the social identity through which knowledge sharing takes place, which will enable the local government to depend on its own sources

to gain a competitive advantage by applying effective decision-making, implementation, and innovation. It has also been predicted that, by way of sharing, officials within the local government disseminate their thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, and experience, mutually establish their common understandings, trust, confidence, and mutual relationship, which can encourage team cohesiveness and motivation within the group to achieve the set goals. However, the KM process encompasses many sub–processes, including knowledge creation, knowledge capturing, knowledge codification, knowledge transfer, and knowledge sharing, which are used for faster decision-making and innovation in the local government (Ramsey & Barkhuizen, 2011).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In order to promote a conceptual model that is neither biased nor constrained by theoretical assumptions and methodological choices, this paper attempts to raise awareness of the important role that social environments and subsequent interaction play in the establishment and sharing of knowledge within the local government context. We have reviewed various literature studies on KM and social identity theory in order to understand how knowledge is currently related, and to understand this within socially constructed entities. Given the influence that epistemological assumptions have on a researcher's interpretation of data, we encourage more KM researchers to consider reinterpreting their existing work or engaging in new research built around the critical and dialogic discourses. In this way, social identity research on KM will develop a stronger theoretical base that includes both favourable and unfavourable consequences of knowledge and its management within the local government context.

Clearly, it is necessary for the local government executive team to understand the role that social activities play in knowledge creation within the local government and, as such, it needs to focus on specific activities and factors that support KM and knowledge sharing. It is also important to align the KM activities with the local government as a whole. The role that social identity plays must be understood and integrated at an early stage, to monitor progress within departments in order to achieve the desired service delivery results. Therefore, executive buy-in is imperative; in order to set KM priorities, and motivate employees at all levels to share their knowledge in their daily work.

It is also of vital importance for the local government to identify and clarify the interconnectivity of causal relationships and other driving forces in KM and social identity. The interconnectivity of these causal relationships demonstrates knowledge-related characteristics of everyday work. Moreover, of great importance is the need to integrate social identity and KM concepts and views. This interconnected system must be treated as a dynamic process. Although research shows that the implementation of KM systems leads to superior service delivery, it is also true that a range of obvious features may be symptomatic of other underlying factors that cannot be influenced directly. For example, for the local government, it may be extremely desirable to have a knowledge-friendly culture. However, it is largely agreed that culture cannot be changed directly, but only through indirect methods, such as incentives, role models, and the like. Subsequently, because of the dynamic nature of this causal interconnected system, it would be necessary for the local government to determine which characteristics and KM activities are needed to obtain the desired service delivery results, and to decide how and at what pace the results can be expected to be implemented and conveyed to other departments.

This research had some limitations. First limited information currently exists on the application of knowledge management in relation to the social context and identity of local governments. This provided a significant challenge in terms of interpreting the results. This sample size was limited to one local government province only which limited the research in terms of generalising the results.

In conclusion, the local government's general approach to the introduction of KM is of great importance, despite negative influences from the external institutional environment. It is difficult to determine, however, whether the KM project in this local government department will be a success in the short term, because of such factors. However, the local government needs to take cognisance of the fact that KM and knowledge sharing do not happen in a vacuum. As demonstrated in Figure 1, it is influenced by our social world of everyday work where we share our stories. We choose with whom we want to share and to which group we want to belong, all of which categorise us. It is imperative for executive management and staff to understand this causal relationship between KM and social identity in endeavours to bring the local government into the 21st century by transforming it into a true knowledge organisation.

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