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Ethical issues in knowledge management:

Conflict of knowledge ownership

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Structured abstract

Purpose: This paper reviews ethical issues inherent in the theorisation and practice of knowledge management (KM) with specific attention to the conflict of knowledge ownership between organisations and individual employees.

Design/methodology/approach: Relevant literature was identified and reviewed via EBSCO host and ISIWeb.

Findings: The paper notes that knowledge, although rooted in individuals, is often claimed or treated as owned by organisations, creating a conflict of knowledge ownership. The paper argues that such an approach to appropriation and management of knowledge leads to tension in knowledge processes between organisations and individuals, and also among individuals. This situation may, in turn, jeopardise individuals' knowledge processing behaviours, and pose difficulties to organisations in managing knowledge effectively.

Research implications: Offers a number of potential research questions that may be turned into research hypotheses and assessed experimentally to refine and develop an ethical approach to KM.

Practical implications: Highlights the need for a renewed moral contract between individuals and organisations, built on ethical constructs of trust, fairness, and justice, which may in turn lead to effective KM practices.

Originality/value: Offers an original conceptual approach to understand and resolve the conflict of knowledge ownership between organizations and individuals.

Article classification: Conceptual paper

Keywords: ethics, individuals, knowledge management, power

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Introduction

Increasingly, organisations see knowledge management (KM) as a valuable management initiative to enhance productivity and generate wealth (Campbell *et al.*, 2012; Burkharda *et al.*, 2011; Spender, 1996). The reason for this trend is that knowledge is interpreted as a source of competitive advantage as well as power (Heizmann, 2011; Toffler, 1990; Sveiby, 1997). According to Foucault (1977: 52): “it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” as it is “not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge”. For this reason, the link between knowledge and power is important in organisational research (Heizmann, 2011; MacKinlay, 2002; Wilkins *et al.*, 1997). Yet, despite power and knowledge being inseparable, Gordon and Grant (2004: 27) are concerned that KM literature generally treats power as ‘unproblematic’ and, therefore, ‘insufficiently addresses the construct of power’ (see also Argandona, 2003; Chen & Choi, 2005). Baskerville and Dulipovici (2006a: 91) see power to be closely related to “knowledge culture, but also to knowledge alliances, knowledge strategy, knowledge organisations, and knowledge processes”.

This paper considers the ethical implications of the emphasis on ‘knowledge is power’ in the employment contract between individuals and organisations in the context of KM. It reviews ethical issues inherent in the theorisation and practice of KM with specific attention to the conflict of knowledge ownership between organisations and individual employees.

Knowledge originates through individuals and is resident in the minds of individuals (Polanyi, 1998). The concept that ‘knowledge is power’ can influence individuals’ knowledge processing behaviours and has been a concern of several scholars. Michailova and Husted (2003) find that individuals’ knowledge secures their economic mean, leading individuals to refrain from sharing knowledge, and Bock and Kim (2002) and Kuo and Young (2008) observe that individuals’ knowledge processing behaviour is determined by their attitude, which is influenced by the recognition they receive for their participation.

While the present paper acknowledges the argument that an organization may have no moral obligation other than to maximize return to its shareholders (Friedman, 1970), and that an organization, unlike individuals, may not experience emotions, it, however, argues that a moral contract still exists between organisations and individuals. This moral contract can be understood in light of Freeman's (2010) stakeholder theory which acknowledges that besides owners and investors, organisations are also responsible to a multitude of stakeholders including but not limited to individual employees, customers and wider society. In their book

‘Managing for Stakeholders’, Freeman et al (2007) explain why the dominant shareholder-centric model is no longer viable in today’s knowledge economy era and why managing for stakeholders offers a better alternative. This paper argues that knowledge generated through individuals’ participation in knowledge processes is appropriated by organisations causing a conflict in knowledge ownership (see Figure 1). Knowledge, understood as solely owned by organisations, may jeopardise individuals’ knowledge processing behaviours, which may also make it difficult for organisations to retain valuable knowledge. Conflict may be described as an antagonistic state or action, e.g., of divergent ideas, interests, or persons. The conflict of knowledge ownership creates tension in knowledge processes and may result in ethical concerns in organisational conduct towards individuals (McCann & Buckner, 2004; Tseng & Fan, 2011). However, individuals’ role in processes related to KM, such as decision making (Rechberg & Cacciolatti, 2013) and the ownership of knowledge (e.g. Bailey & Clarke, 2001; Constant *et al.*, 1994; Kolekofski & Heminger, 2003), remains underexplored.

Figure 1. The conflict of knowledge ownership

In the next section, the paper offers a discussion of knowledge and KM to show why individuals’ participation is critical for ethical knowledge processes. Thereafter, power, conflict and ethics and their roles in KM are explained. This is followed by what the paper describes as the conflict of knowledge ownership, which the paper argues may impair knowledge processes, because of a struggle of knowledge ownership between individuals and organisations and also among individuals. In its second half, the paper develops an ethical approach to KM, i.e., an approach to managing knowledge, which is built on trust, fairness and justice, enabled by a moral contact between organisations and individuals.

Knowledge and knowledge management

In this and subsequent section, the paper provides an overview of literature on knowledge and its management, and ethics, power and conflict in KM, to develop a theoretical understanding of the conflict of knowledge ownership. The literature was researched via EBSCO host and ISIWeb. The constructs of knowledge, KM, ethics, power and conflict in relation to KM were

used to locate relevant literature. Those articles addressing any of these constructs in title, abstract or key words were scanned, and only those considered relevant to the conflict of knowledge ownership in organisations were selected. This systematic collection and interpretation of the literature was used to improve rigour, balance and transparency of the reviewing process (Rousseau *et al.*, 2008; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003).

Knowledge

Knowledge is rooted in individuals and is externalised through their interaction with the outside world (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Polanyi, 1998). Knowledge is the “innately human quality, residing in the living mind of a person” (Myers, 1996: 2). Knowledge can be explicit, in forms of data and information, or tacit and so embedded in individuals (Polanyi, 1998). Tywoniak (2007) categorises knowledge into tacit and explicit as well as common and private types of knowledge, where all four types of knowledge originate through individuals. For example, a company’s corporate policy is common corporate knowledge that can have its origin in other policies and explicit laws; nonetheless, it is through individuals’ private knowledge and their ability to collaborate in community that such policies are formalised according to the needs of the company at hand.

All knowledge is originally tacit and rooted within individuals (e.g. Dowd & Courchaine, 1996; Leonard & Sensiper, 1998; Polanyi, 1967; Sveiby, 1999; Wright, 2005). Through individuals’ knowledge contribution in the corporate sphere products and services can be brought into being to be retailed. Wegner’s (1987) work on transactive memory and Woolley *et al.* (2010: 687) study on collective intelligence as — “a property of the group itself, not just the individuals in it” — do not contradict the argument made here. In fact, do their findings support the need for this study as Woolley *et al.* (2010: 688) write that the knowledge of the group “appears to depend both on the composition of the group (e.g., average member intelligence) and on factors that emerge from the way group members interact when they are assembled (e.g., their conversational turn-taking behaviour).” As individual can choose to withhold their knowledge contribution knowledge processes can be jeopardised within the group and the organisation at large, individuals are therefore seen at the really source of knowledge and are the subject of this study.

It is individuals’ ability to engage in knowledge processes that can enable organisations to manage knowledge (Kaufmann & Runco, 2009). Tywoniak (2007) shows that not all forms of knowledge lead to explicit and common knowledge that can be owned by organisations,

such as intellectual property discussed below. Tacit forms of knowledge, such as embezzled, embodied, and embedded knowledge (Collins, 1993), are private to individuals and are difficult to be appropriated, yet can be crucial for KM effectiveness. For example, the policies and material a company provides is only brought to life through individuals' interpretation, without individuals making sense of it, it is arguably of little value. Furthermore, it is through the voluntary participation of more experienced workers that work related tasks can be explained to others so learning can take place.

Knowledge management

KM can be seen as an activity concerned with initiatives and strategies to manage knowledge in an organisation's context. Organisation theorists suggest that competitiveness can be reached where employees' collective knowledge is adequately exploited (Barney, 2001; Penrose, 1959; Peteraf, 1993). Through KM, "business processes, information technologies, knowledge repositories and individual behaviour" are meant to be amended, so an organisation can 'act as intelligently as possible' (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003:79). KM practices can enhance knowledge processing by knowledge being transferred, stored, acquired, exchanged, shared, created, retained and protected (Hedlund 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Organisations especially strive for knowledge creation as it is through the creation of knowledge that organisations can differentiate themselves from competitors (von Krogh *et al.*, 2000). Individuals' explicit and tacit knowledge processing behaviour can then lead the organisation to profit (Wang & Noe, 2010).

The focus of this paper, primarily, is on organisations operating in capitalistic societies where knowledge tends to be seen as a source of power and influence to promote corporate economic interests rather than those of individuals (Glisby & Holden, 2003). While not all KM practices employed by organisations necessarily lead to an ethical misconduct, there is a need to enhance an understanding of the role of individuals in knowledge ownership and KM practices. Based on Nonaka's (1991) *Knowledge Creating Company*, KM may be built on cultural values and management practices "where the core of the enterprise is not the managerial class, but rather the permanent workers group" (Glisby & Holden, 2003: 33). Nonetheless, KM appears to be developed not as a practice established by individuals working for the management, but rather by individuals' management. This appropriation of knowledge may be problematic and unjust as individuals' knowledge may be treated as a

source of power for organisational gains with little regard for individual ownership and interests.

Next the paper discusses the link between KM and power, conflict and ethics to explain why there is a need to address the conflict of knowledge ownership between organisations and individuals.

Power, conflict and ethics in KM

Power in KM

Foucault (1977) sees knowledge and power as coexisting and interlinked. The treatment of knowledge as a source of power and influence is particularly evident in capitalistic contexts (Glisby & Holden, 2003). A few years ago, the Deutsche Bank (2001) advertised that “ideas are capital the rest is just money” and the director of the Asian Development Bank (2009) addressed the board saying “to be fully effective, we must also consciously and actively blend knowledge with financing”. As the management of knowledge means the attempt to manage and acquire power, a conflict in knowledge ownership may arise (McCann & Buckner, 2004; Tseng & Fan, 2011). Tension results not only because an individual or organisation may possess more competitive knowledge over another, but also because of decision makers’ and supervisors’ power over their subordinates (Dahl, 1957; Grant, 1996). Here individuals are asked to do something they might otherwise not do, i.e. knowledge creating and sharing.

It is important to note that the general definition of power has two distinct components: social power and personal power (Van Dijke and Poppe 2006). Social power is an individual’s ability to influence and exercise control over others by making them do things they would not otherwise do (French and Raven 1959). Personal power is the ability to do and get what one wants without being influenced by others (Emerson 1962; French and Raven 1959; Overbeck, Tiedens, and Brion 2006; Van Dijke and Poppe 2006). It is important to differentiate the effects of social power from personal power in the context of KM in organizations. Individuals are said to have social power when they can control the outcomes of another person, affecting that person’s status and access to rewards or resources (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). Van Dijke and Poppe (2006) demonstrate that, given the choice, individuals act to increase their personal power instead of their social power. Van Dijke and Poppe argue that when individuals act to increase their power over others, they are

motivated not by a wish to control others, but by a wish to not be controlled by others. In other words, through ownership of knowledge, individuals may hope to have at least some control over their own careers in organisations.

Conflict in KM

The power struggle between competing parties and contenders may lead to conflict. Jehn and Mannix (2001) studied the nature of conflict in group performance. Their findings on relationship and process conflict are relevant in the conflict in KM. Relationship conflict results from interpersonal incompatibilities (Amason, 1996). Individuals may feel tension in situations where one employee is in need of knowledge and the knowledgeable co-worker is reluctant to share. Such behaviour may emerge where knowledge is treated as power and there is insufficient recognition for individual role in knowledge processing. Additional relationship conflicts may occur where an individual feels a conflict of interest between the clientele and the organisation. Here the levels to which individuals feel having the obligation to hold back valuable knowledge or having the right for freedom of speech need to be considered.

Process conflict too may be a substantial hindrance for KM to be effective (Jehn, 1997). Process conflict results through the way tasks are delegated and undertaken, by whom, when and where, e.g., the delegation of decision making can result in process conflict (Grant, 1996; Rechberg & Cacciolatti, 2013). For example, who is responsible to initiate knowledge mobilisation, who has control over it, who is to utilize it and when etc. Uncertainty in such situations may lead to individual dissatisfaction, low levels of group morale and a reduction of productivity (Jehn, 1997).

Ethics in KM

Ethics may be described as behavioural codes that are regarded as right and good by individuals and the society at large. Ethical standards are understood to be rooted in teleology (Hume, 1750; Smith, 1759) and deontology (Kant, 1785). Whereas the teleological approach finds the end or consequence of an act to be the critical indication of good or bad, deontology sees the action in itself as the foundation to ethics (Land *et al.*, 2007; Mingers, 2011). A third approach to ethics is Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (350 B.C.). Here it is a person's behaviour and not the consequences of an act, or the act in itself, that has to be ethically just (Mingers, 2011). Our understanding of what is ethical and morally correct is, however,

“rarely the subject of absolute standards” (Land *et al.*, 2007: 3). According to MacIntyre (1985), our ethical understanding is based on the value system embedded in the community we live in. In the case of KM, its practices might be unjust in a capitalistic context where the focus is not on individuals but rather on organisational profits and gains (Glisby & Holden, 2003).

It is important to recognise that ethics is “not merely a philosophical abstract theory, but also a critical guideline in the personal or collective practice” (Tseng & Fan, 2011: 326).

Individuals, as members of society and organisational settings, are given guidance to respect the collective ethical norms (Tseng & Fan, 2011). This is also the case in KM where knowledge ownership is regulated by organisations, and where engagement with knowledge processes is encouraged as a means-to-end approach to KM. Hayes and Walsham (2000), for example, warn that organisations might promote being knowledge intensive firms, to enforce conformity; implicitly speaking of “a vault managerial confidence: the tacit knowledge of the workforce is ... a resource to be willingly shared by all” (MacKinlay, 2002: 77). Such an approach to KM, using individuals and their knowledge as the means-to-end for organisational gain may be morally unjust and lead to conflict.

Where favouritism rules, individuals are likely to punish the unfair agent (Rabin, 1993), e.g., by refraining from sharing or processing knowledge. Fairness is practiced when individuals are treated as equals and the needs of both individuals and organisations are treated as equally important. A just approach to KM may improve the quality of tacit knowledge sharing (Bock *et al.*, 2005). “Justice is not to be confused with an all-inclusive vision of a good society” (Rawls, 1958: 165). It is the moral obligation between parties so that knowledge could be effectively and ethically processed. In addition, knowledge processes, such as knowledge sharing, may be enabled through a trust culture (Bock *et al.*, 2005; Ford, 2003; Lin, 2007; Nygaard & Russo, 2008). Trust refers to the care and reliance of an organisation towards its employees and vice versa (Politis, 2003). Before explaining an ethical approach to KM built on trust, fairness and justice that can inform a moral contract between individuals and organisations, the paper discusses the conflict of knowledge ownership to show how the ‘knowledge is power’ approach may lead to unethical KM initiatives.

The conflict of knowledge ownership

The emphasis on 'knowledge is power' is arguably a major ethical challenge facing KM as a discipline. Knowledge is not an ordinary resource amid others (land and capital), but the only significant resource that can generate wealth (Drucker, 1993; Quinn, 1992). For knowledge to be of value, it is interpreted as an asset: 80% of organisations participating in the KPMG (2003: 8) survey on KM "recognise knowledge as a strategic asset." Knowledge is an asset in so far that it is used by someone else other than the original creator (Baird & Henderson, 2001; Teece, 1998).

To measure the value of knowledge, intellectual capitals, patents and copyrights are organisational entities to be hoarded, owned and developed. Dean and Kretschmer (2007) list elements included in the definition of intellectual capital, meaning everything from the commitment, goodwill and competence of individuals and their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Ulrich, 1998), the assets of a firm such as databases, software and research and development (Granstrand, 1999), to customer relations and employee innovations (Dzinkowski, 2000), and collective brainpower (Stewart, 1997). As such, it is the syndication of both explicit and tacit knowledge, derived at through human, organisational (or structural) and customer capital that give intellectual capital its meaning (Petty & Guthrie, 2000; Teece, 1998).

Individuals are organisations' main generator of wealth (Dean & Kretschmer, 2003; Earl, 2001). Organisational success is built through individuals' knowledge, and new knowledge that can be transformed into valuable intellectual capital is *only* generated through individuals' voluntary participation (Becker *et al.*, 2002; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Roselander, 1997). Grant (1996: 119) states: "If the primary productive resource of the firm is knowledge, and if knowledge resides in individual employees, then it is employees who own the bulk of the firm's resources." Nonetheless, organisations often claim ownership over knowledge that is originally produced by individuals. Through intellectual capital, organisations gain "property rights of the mind" (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006a: 86).

The conflict of knowledge ownership emerges where organisations, not individuals, hold ownership over knowledge (e.g. Felin & Hesterly, 2007; Wright *et al.*, 1994). Knowledge is often interpreted as a joint property of the group, considered to be lacking in value if not clustered in some way (Kogut & Zander, 1996; Kuhn, 1970). Knowledge processes take

place in social settings and knowledge is considered to be a public property, owned and maintained by organisations (Tseng & Fan, 2011; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). According to this view, “knowledge processes are social processes” (Timbrell *et al.*, 2005: 248) and individuals have to engage in a community to access and advance knowledge, and for mutual learning to take place (March, 1991; Woolley *et al.*, 2010). Through sharing their knowledge, individuals are able to enhance the value of their knowledge (Coleman, 1988).

This social and collective view on knowledge is criticised by Holmers (1990: 218) who argues that all “public knowledge must have a private base”. Organisations exist through the cooperation and commitment of individuals (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994). Without individuals participating in organisational space, knowledge is not processed. Knowledge assets are the know-how of individuals, and for organisations to be able to buy and sell knowledge, individuals collaborate is needed (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006b). Organisations contract with individuals to secure the knowledge sources brought to the job (Grant, 1996). Individuals certainly enter into employment contracts voluntarily, accept to work for an organisation, and the working contract binds individuals to collaborate. Individuals apply their knowledge to the benefit of the organisation in exchange for payment. There are jobs where knowledge processing is part of an individual’s work agreement i.e., a management consultant and product development, and there are jobs where employees engage in work related knowledge processes, such as enlarging the customer pool and updating the IT system. In other occupational agreements, i.e., in engineering, and unskilled machine operations, knowledge processing is needed for an organisation to thrive, yet it is less likely to be recognised as a valuable source of knowledge (Nakano *et al.*, 2013; Rechberg & Cacciolatti, 2013).

Work contract with an organisation can be of value to individual employees to broaden their own knowledge base through interacting with others in the organisational space. Fritz *et al.* (2011), for example, find that individuals like to learn new skills to thrive at work, and they like to help others to advance especially where the work relationships are positive. Furthermore, individuals refraining from knowledge processes arguably violate their employment contract. Grant (1996) explains that organisations can only claim partial ownership over knowledge contributed by individuals: “Unlike physical and financial assets, employment contracts confer upon the firm only partial and ill-defined ownership rights over employees' knowledge assets” (p.119). There is, however, scanty attention paid to the origin of intellectual capital that gives organisations value (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

DeLong and Fahey (2000) note that it is the cultural norms and practices of an organisation that determines how and by whom knowledge is to be processed and what knowledge is to be owned by the organisation. For example, does the Anglo-Saxon' legal system on copyrights prevent unfair competition while disregarding authors right to own their work (Chen & Choi, 2005). This may lead to a de-privatisation of individuals' knowledge calling for an ethical enquiry. While organisational performance depends on individuals' experience, education and skills (Coff, 2002; Teigland & McLure-Wasko, 2000), the focus is on organisational and not on individual needs (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). A de-privatisation of individuals' knowledge through intellectual property rights and knowledge codification may disadvantage individuals, and such an approach to KM may spark injustice by violating individuals' right to own their knowledge (Currie & Kerrin, 2004; Lipinski & Britz, 2000; Wang & Noe, 2010). Next the paper explains how a conflict of knowledge ownership may lead to tension in knowledge processes essential for KM to be effective.

Since knowledge is associated with power and organisations tend to lay claim on it, tension in knowledge processes may arise, leading to problems such as knowledge hoarding and also free riding (Ford, 2003, Inkpen & Dinur, 1998). Knowledge, even though it can be created in isolation (Kaufmann & Runco, 2009), is more commonly created through a collective knowledge creating spiral (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Created knowledge, i.e. a new product or service, is then a measurable success of the firm (Teece, 1998) and a public good "from which all benefit, [and] to which all contribute ... [without] person-specific rewards" (Sen, 1993:51).

Individuals' beliefs about knowledge ownership are likely to influence their knowledge processing behaviour (Constant *et al.*, 1994; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Since knowledge processing for organisational gains can be de-motivating (Wang, 2004), knowledge hoarding may be an outcome. Insufficient or inefficient reward systems may lead individuals to believe they are better off hoarding rather than sharing what they know (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). Certainly, organisations providing individuals with the tools needed to create knowledge have the right to benefit from individuals' knowledge contributions, yet, "the benefits of KM are often preserved solely at the level of the organisation or the decision-maker, rather than the level of the individuals in an organisation" (Quintas *et al.*, 1997: 30). An employee's remuneration is based on the working contract; if their efforts to share knowledge exceed the contract, rewards are no guarantee.

Individuals' status, education, skills and expertise are their currency in the labour market (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). For Michailova and Husted (2003), individuals' economic circumstances and desires may lead them to hoard their knowledge, in particular in hostile organisational environments. A competitive corporate culture and uncertainty may lead individuals to view knowledge as their source for job security. In particular, it is the tacit knowledge that is their informal economic currency (Constant *et al.*, 1994; McKinlay, 2000). Individuals might feel they could lose ownership over their knowledge when sharing it for the corporate good and so could choose to hold on to their source of power (DeLong & Fahey, 2000). The same may happen among colleagues where new discoveries are hoarded, so the possible success of the innovation will stay with the original finder. Knowledge hoarding may also occur in situations where knowledge sharing is judged and penalised. Individuals may feel they are may be disadvantaged for having obtained knowledge that, if shared, could threaten their employment, i.e. whistle blowing.

Participating in knowledge sharing may also be seen as an unnatural act (Davenport & Prusak, 1998), and a rigid corporate structure and culture may further aggravate the culture of knowledge sharing (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006b; Wang, 2004). In situations of 'non-conformist thinking' (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006a), necessary for knowledge creation to be inspired, tension between those holding positional power and those having valuable ideas may arise (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Willem & Scarbrough, 2006). Managers may disapprove of innovative thinking, fearing to lose their superior position, or may hoard knowledge essential for individuals to effectively perform their work task.

The problem is that individuals' interests are not always considered in the benefits that organisations reap from their knowledge, which can lead to the reluctance to share knowledge and free riding (Britz *et al.*, 2006; Da Costa *et al.*, 2010). Free riding can result where individuals' knowledge is praised as a public good (Wang & Noe, 2010). In this situation, individuals freely use knowledge provided by others without sharing their own (Currie & Kerrin, 2004). If individuals see a struggle, possible inequality and exploitation, in the way knowledge is managed, they may even leave the organisation leading to knowledge loss (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). To withstand tensions in knowledge processes, KM can be built on an ethical approach that may result in a moral contract between organisations and their employees so that knowledge can effectively be managed.

Ethical approach to KM: A moral contract

By moral contract, this paper refers to rights and responsibilities of employer and employees (and other economic actors). Patel and Ragsdell (2011) highlight the need for a fair and ethical framework, while Tseng and Fan (2011) stress the importance of an ethical organisational climate to facilitate knowledge processes. An ethical approach to KM may help organisations in engaging individuals in knowledge processes and also help in retaining individuals' knowledge and experience (Liebowitz, 1999). In other words, trust, fairness and justice are important ingredients to stimulate individuals' voluntary participation in knowledge processes.

The importance of trust for knowledge to be processed has been studied by various scholars in the KM discipline (e.g. Ford, 2003; Holste & Fields, 2010; Politis, 2003; Wiig, 2012; Williams, 2007). Trust may prevent knowledge hoarding and knowledge loss (DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005), and may drive innovative behaviour (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). Burchell and Cook (2008) show that trust is central for participants to share and create knowledge. The trustworthiness among individuals affects their commitment to the group and therefore the extent to which knowledge is processed (Kolekofski & Heminger, 2003; Zelaya-Zamora & Senoo, 2012). Where there is trust in an organisation, individuals can rely on the organisation to care for them. Here individuals feel they can trust their colleagues and managers and freely process knowledge rather than protect themselves and their knowledge.

The moral obligation individuals sense towards an organisation is deteriorated by organisations' use of power (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). Individuals may feel exploited and therefore may be less willing to participate in knowledge processes. Baskerville and Dulipovici (2006a) advocate for fair KM practice where individuals are rewarded for their knowledge contributions: "firms that treat its workers well are often very richly rewarded for it" (Sen, 1993: 52). Providing incentives as an exchange to individuals' knowledge contribution may encourage and advance fairness (Bock *et al.*, 2005). Knowledge processing may be a satisfying activity for individuals to participate in, when it leads to recognition and status, and increases their expertise and knowledge base, which can possibly lead to a promotion and increase in salary (Wang & Noe, 2010).

Ultimately KM practices need to be just. The knowledge individuals obtain and create during the course of their employment is an intellectual capital of the individuals, and organisations may refrain from trying to control it (Chen & Choi, 2005; Gorman, 2004). In fact, individuals have the legal right to protect their knowledge (according to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 17 – Right to property): Knowledge processes thus have to be voluntary (in Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006b: 3). Da Costa Prior and Rogerson (2010) view a just atmosphere, where individuals can feel driven to process knowledge, as a promising approach to KM. Thus, a moral contract is important to build an ethical and just approach to KM in organisations.

Of course, what is interpreted as ethical and morally correct may vary (Land *et al.*, 2007). The paper proposes a moral contract that organisations and individuals may engage in to enhance KM effectiveness. The moral contract may be enabled by: individuals' involvement in the decision making processes for KM practices; a just corporate agenda; a redefinition of knowledge ownership; and a corporate culture that promotes knowledge processing so knowledge can effectively be managed. The integrated framework representing the moral contract is illustrated in Figure 2. The four elements are mutually dependent and mutually supportive to a paradigm shift from 'knowledge is power' to 'sharing of knowledge is power'.

Figure 2. The moral contract promoting KM effectiveness

Individuals' involvement in KM decision making

Individuals “do not spend energy on something they do not believe in” (Rampersad, 2003: 252). For KM to be effective, it has to be of value not only to the organisation but also to the individuals meant to engage in knowledge processes (Bailey & Clarke, 2001). The proposal is to give individuals a voice in decisions made on KM practices. If it is for individuals to choose when to participate in knowledge related activities and how they see a personal benefit from engaging in the practice, they might be more likely to contribute to an organisation's KM practices. Individuals can assist the organisation in identifying what KM practices they need to effectively process knowledge. Involving individuals into the decision making processes on KM may also promote fairness and an atmosphere of care. Furthermore, individuals may feel valued and empowered in their jobs, which can advance KM effectiveness. Listening to individuals insights may further help in developing a just corporate agenda and a corporate culture conducive for knowledge processes.

A just corporate agenda

Arguably, organisations have the social responsibility to develop KM initiatives in a ‘right and good’ manner that will not harm individuals, but will build their trust. In such an environment, individuals as well as organisational needs are met and the focus is not merely on fulfilling organisational objectives. Organisations can draw on Aristotle's concept of a ‘dutiful act’ where the well-being of individuals and society at large is considered. Kant (1991: 106; orig. 1785) said: “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (in Mingers, 2011:115). Solomon (2004), for example, suggests that organisational ethics require incorporating organisational, social, as well as individual needs. Accordingly, for an organisation to invest in KM in a ‘right and good’ manner, the individuals employed in the organisation, the society surrounding it, and the organisation itself need to be taken into consideration: Integrating individuals into the decision making processes can be useful to develop a just corporate agenda, and the just agenda is likely to lead to a redefinition of knowledge ownership.

Redefined knowledge ownership

KM, per se, does not result in organisational effectiveness as it is through the voluntary participation of individuals that knowledge may be effectively processed. Since knowledge is mostly private to individuals, individuals are the legitimate and foremost owners of knowledge. McDermott (1999: 112) argues that knowledge needs to have an “owner” who cares. McDermott suggests communities as the level for knowledge ownership; here knowledge is a social resource. Yet, what has to be considered is that if individuals do not willing participate in knowledge sharing in the group, knowledge cannot be shared, created, or collectively owned. It is, therefore, important that individuals are allowed to hold ownership (albeit no exclusive) over their knowledge. Jarvenpaa and Staples (2001) promote that individuals’ right to own their knowledge, and the right of an organisation to make use of that knowledge, can co-exist and develop good relationships. Where individuals are the owners of knowledge, an organisation can build a corporate culture that empowers individuals in their knowledge process. The paper argues that a knowledge-centred culture may enable a moral contract that individuals and organisations can engage in to effectively manage knowledge.

A knowledge-centred culture

The commitment an organisation has toward individuals can advance corporate citizenship (Grant *et al.*, 2008). Individuals need to be able to trust their organisation, and the organisation may consider providing a conducive organisational environment to promote knowledge creation and innovative thinking (Bock *et al.*, 2005). An organisation is more than a structure within which individuals meet, but rather a venue for ‘open conversation’, a space where communication can be encouraged. Here KM practices are established to help individuals feel confident to express their thoughts and engage in critical thinking. Organisations can, for example, create open forums to promote free speech and invest in cross functional focus groups suitable to individuals. Individuals can feel comfortable to question their own and their co-workers performance and feel they have the time and space to find alternative solutions.

A knowledge-centred culture can encourage individuals to seek knowledge, and reward individuals for their participation in knowledge processes. Individuals are made to feel that they will benefit from participating in knowledge processes to be motivated and supportive of their organisation’s KM practices. Allowing individuals to participate in the decision making

processes may be helpful in creating a conducive KM culture at work. Continuous reinforcement via performance appraisals and promoting innovation and free thinking may add value. The need to allow mistakes ensures that effectiveness is enhanced from lessons learned. Suitable rewards may be offered, and individuals may be promoted to encourage them to willingly support organisational knowledge processes (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Husted & Michailova, 2002). Creating such a transparent, 'together culture' rather than an opaque, either/or culture may nurture and encourage individuals to willingly process knowledge.

Discussion

The emphasis of this paper is on the conflict of knowledge ownership that may arise between individuals and organisations, and also among individuals. This conflict is, in particular, evident in organisations aspiring to appropriate knowledge, prioritising their own interests over individual employees' interests. KM practices may be used to translate individual knowledge into an organisation's source for power. Acquiring individuals' knowledge for organisational profit may lead to possible ethical misconduct toward individuals, and create a conflict between those originally owning knowledge (individuals), and those claiming ownership over knowledge (organisations). As a result, vital knowledge processes may be jeopardised. Growing awareness that individuals are indispensable for knowledge processes to occur and that knowledge is a private, not a common good, may alleviate the underlying tension in knowledge processes in organisations.

Figure 3 illustrates the conflict of knowledge ownership explained in this paper. The vertical axis represents the organisation's claim for knowledge ownership while the horizontal axis represents individuals as knowledge owners. The shaded triangle represents the accredited owner of knowledge. The line separating the organisations' claim for knowledge ownership and the individuals' right to knowledge ownership represents KM practices.

Figure 3. Ethical and unethical approaches to KM

Figure 3a represents an unethical approach to KM. As indicated through the shaded triangles, the organisation claims ownership over individuals' knowledge. In such a situation, individuals may be reluctant to engage in KM practices as their contribution is not acknowledged. The dotted line indicates that knowledge processes are discontinuous in such a situation.

Figure 3b illustrates an ethical approach to KM: Here individuals feel that KM initiatives are just and built on fairness, and individuals feel that their engagement in the KM processes is duly acknowledged and rewarded. Figure 3b represents a scenario where moral contract has been integrated. A moral contract between organisations and individuals can enable an ethical approach to effectively manage knowledge.

Integrating individuals into the decisions made on KM practices can promote a just agenda where organisations can show accountability and goodwill. Individuals can be acknowledged as legitimate and foremost owners of knowledge and fairly rewarded for it, motivating and supporting them to willingly process knowledge. The darker shaded triangle in Figure 3b indicates that individuals are appreciated for their knowledge contribution and are acknowledged as the true owner of knowledge. Through a moral contract between the organisation and the individual, tensions in knowledge processes can be resolved and

knowledge hoarding, free riding and possible knowledge loss can be prevented. The line representing knowledge processes in Figure 3b is, therefore, continuous. As individuals are likely to process knowledge in an ethical climate, the organisation can then make use of individuals' knowledge contribution (as indicated through the lighter shaded triangle in Figure 3b).

Conclusion

The paper has addressed the conflict of knowledge ownership between organisations and individuals and also among individuals to explain why an ethical approach to KM is needed for individuals to willingly participate in knowledge processes. The usual organisational emphasis on 'knowledge is power' may create a conflict of knowledge ownership between those originally owning knowledge (individuals) and those claiming ownership over acquired knowledge (organisations). The paper has shown that an organisation's attempt to appropriate individuals' knowledge may significantly affect individuals' intentions and behaviours to participate in KM practices, resulting in tensions and losses in knowledge processes. The paper has highlighted the need for a moral contract of KM between organisations and individuals that is built on the ethical constructs of trust, fairness and justice, so that individuals are acknowledged as legitimate and foremost owners of knowledge, and are willing to participate in KM and enhance its effectiveness.

Research implications and directions

Linking ethics and KM may be helpful in developing ethical conceptualisations of KM for organisational as well as individual gains. Individuals, as they have a fundamental role in KM practices, need to be integrated in the theory and practice of KM and there is room for research to address this need. KM is embedded in the struggle of knowledge ownership and these power dynamics need further investigation. Research on KM can make use of the moral contract theory to alleviate the tension and conflict between individuals and organisations over knowledge ownership and management. In the light of this research, a number of potential research questions can be identified that may be turned into research hypotheses and addressed experimentally. For example: To what extents is knowledge manipulated in organisations for individual and/or organizational gains? To what extent do managers or senior executives control and appropriate knowledge possessed and created by individual employees and subordinates? To what extent does an emphasis on business benefits affect the

power of individual employees on the knowledge they possess or create? To what extent does an increasing focus on specialisation contribute to the knowledge power struggle and tensions in organizations? To what extent is KM a long term strategy, rather than an approach to reach short term profit?

Future scholars may investigate the concept of knowledge and power in relation to reliability and utility of knowledge for organisational and/or individual gains. A deeper study into ethical aspects of KM may look at the power of managers over individuals and the tendency towards a business case orientation that might (mis)appropriate individuals' knowledge. In addition, a study on knowledge as economic power in a cross-country comparison may highlight important cross-cultural differences. Studying knowledge as a resource based on individual contribution to KM practices rather than a social good may bring valuable insight into what leads individuals to participate in KM practices. This may, in turn, advance research on knowledge sharing and creation. Also, how the increasing focus on specialisation influences the knowledge power struggle, in relation to knowledge processes, may be addressed fruitful avenue for future research.

Practical implications

Organisations and managers may review their current approaches to KM, in light of the moral contact theory, to assess if an integration of ethical KM practices will enable individuals to willingly engage in knowledge creation and sharing. Organisations may conduct surveys and experiments to identify how KM is seen by their employees and how it can be altered into a just practice for individuals and managers. Such investigations may help in assessing if individuals feel they are truly recognized and valued for their knowledge contribution to the workplace. Interviews and focus groups may be useful to develop more in depth understanding of tensions and apprehensions related to knowledge management. By integrating individuals into the decision making processes on KM practices, organisations may alter KM practices according to individuals' needs and contexts.

Field work on ethics in KM is equally important. It can be tested if the moral contact is useful in practice, and what it is that individuals need to engage in KM. The present paper has highlighted the need to understand KM as a long term strategy, rather than an approach to achieve short term profit. A short term approach may jeopardise KM as individuals will

either refrain from knowledge processing and sharing, or look for alternative employment, leading to critical knowledge loss.

Limitations

There are certain noteworthy limitations of this paper. The focus of the paper was on individuals working in profit-oriented corporations or contexts, driven by the 'knowledge is power' discourse. The authors of this paper are aware that in certain cultural contexts, e.g., Japan, where everyone is part of the 'collective self', ethical concerns about individual rights to knowledge ownership may be less intense (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006b; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Moreover, there may also be other ethical issues that have not been addressed in the present study. For example, the paper has not addressed Confucius' (551-479 B.C.) discussion on ethics, including Confucian business ethics (Koehn, 2001), that may be relevant to KM in China and other Asian countries. The paper has also not fully explored the laws in intellectual property to assess if ethical issues and rights of individuals in KM have been addressed. It is, however, hoped that the paper brought useful and relevant insights to fore, highlighting the need to develop an ethical approach to KM.

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