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**BUSINESS COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A  
MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE AND CHANGE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article reinforces the notion articulated by discourse ethics that moral reasoning is concerned with generalizable interests and modalities for regulating interpersonal affairs and contesting claims. The article also considers the fact that the basic question as to which way to proceed in determining a proper fit between the profit motive of firms and the long-term welfare of ordinary citizens must be decided upon through discursive processes of legitimation. In addition, the article affirms that the collaboration hypothesis forms a basis for understanding the process of consensual validation of alternative claims and stakes. Hence, the article concludes that the form of integrative collaboration proposed has the potential to amplify the possibilities for discursive reasoning. The article also suggests that these processes can lead to a positive feedback loop in organizations that enhances performance and acceleration of organizational growth.

**Keywords:** moral reasoning, discourse ethics, collaboration hypothesis, Ubuntu, Jürgen Habermas.

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**INTRODUCTION**

This article posits that an ethic of collaboration manifested through the principle of discourse ethics can contribute to the search for norms of appropriateness and the good. It is suggested that these norms of appropriateness are adjunct to models of development that contrast with anti-developmental norms such as political and cultural hegemony, corruption and fraud. Other anti-developmental practices to enumerate here include the abuse of child labor, governance and sustainability, and the environment. Proceeding from these premises, the article upholds the view that moral and ethical codes of conduct in business and society is essential for sustainable economic growth and business development.

This statement is also apropos to the nature and character of transactional relationships in sub-Saharan Africa; an area that has been designated as underdeveloped on a multitude of economic and social indices. Research findings in the business ethics literature demonstrate that where ethical considerations and moral forms of life are absent, business development and societies have suffered and hence remained chronically underdeveloped. Mulinge and Nesetedi (1998) affirmed this perspective in their article on *corruption* and *colonialism* in sub-Saharan Africa.

Succeeding sections of this article examine statement of the problem and other relevant issues. The article also considers a discussion of discourse ethics in terms of how it constitutes the philosophical foundation and a primary theoretical source of an integrative business ethics approach—based on the collaborative hypothesis. The article suggests that an integrative collaboration hypothesis constitutes a viable ethical platform for business practice. The article posits that the integrative features of the collaboration hypothesis make it a viable moral framework to guide organizational practice and change in sub-Saharan Africa. Next, the article concludes with a presentation of final thoughts and policy alternatives.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Since the inception of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf administration in postwar Liberia, foreign direct investment from overseas concessions has performed miserably due primarily to corruption, graft, and other institutional paralyses. Meanwhile in Nigeria, the largest economy in Africa, corruption in both the private and public sectors remains historically and legendarily endemic.

Many concerned citizens and news commentators, including the former Governor of *the Central Bank of Nigeria*, Sanusi (Nossiter, 2014; Kay, Bala-Gbogbo & Mbachu, 2014) claimed just last year that billions of United States dollars went missing from the petroleum sector, depriving the Nigerian economy of needed injection of financial resources to meet the country's development needs.

South Africa, with all its enormous potential, has also not fared very well in terms of the perversion of transactional business relationships on account of infractions of ethical rules of business conduct. Other countries in sub-Saharan Africa are also reported to have been affected by corrosive effect of corruption on business development and the growth of viable corporate and individual entrepreneurialism (Mulinge & Nesetedi, 1998). Basically, both small and large firms have underperformed miserably because of the lack of a moral framework for effective collaborative endeavors. There are other reasons for failure to note of course. Given these social and ethical perversions, business ethics scholars and social scientists have preoccupied themselves with generating adequate explanatory models that fit the problems (see for example, Reed, 1990; Mulinge & Nesetedi, 1998; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

This article is one of such efforts. The article posits that a process of sustained change could be unleashed through a critical approach to business ethics and communication. Toward this end the article proposes that the collaboration hypothesis is a viable candidate for a business ethics and communication approach. The collaboration hypothesis is built on stakeholder principles and it examines modalities of positive collaboration that leads to organizational success. The collaboration hypothesis has also been presented here in the context of Ubuntu—an African philosophical tradition and mode of cultural practice.

### **Discourse Ethics and Business Communication**

Agreeing with Moon (1995), one would posit that the search for the ultimate foundation for moral and political beliefs led social theorists to the concept of discourse as a moral foundation for defending the legitimacy of social practices. This quest also inevitably led to the introduction of discourse theory in explaining communicative practices in varying fields of human endeavors including education, business ethics, moral and political theory. Thus, the political theory of discourse ethics privileges the value of social communication and rational discourse in the adjudication of claims by all those who have stakes in the operations of firm or other organizational forms. Discourse ethics is both method and mode of procedural justification of action-oriented norms. This approach in the overarching philosophical theory of modernity was given rise to through the publication of the Theory of Communicative Action in 1981 (Borradori, 2003).

This publication by Jürgen Habermas signaled a turn toward a new framework of inquiry that integrated a variety of theoretical sources including the ordinary language school of J.L. Austin and John Searle. Other influences on this new framework came from Norm Chomsky generative approach to linguistics, the

psychological and moral theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, and the social model of analysis elaborated by George Herbert Meade and Talcott Parsons (p.66).

Discourse ethics presupposes that the basic question as to which way to proceed in determining a fit between the immediate profit motive of firms and the long-term welfare of ordinary citizens and stakeholders must be decided upon through discursive processes of legitimation and participatory models of development. Through these processes, one would suggest that the likelihood that people would become empowered and motivated is enhanced.

Hence, what is at stake here ultimately is to curb the normative exercise of power (Ingram, 1987). One should concede that this form of exercising power leads invariably to groupthink and the ossification of bureaucratic and antidemocratic rules into norms that militate against all forms of procedural justification. Furthermore, one should look no harder to observe that normative exercise of power also presents itself permanently in structures of distorted communication (p. 13).

Taking his cues from the German philosopher Fichte, Habermas accepts the principal thesis "that in emancipatory reflection, our practical interest in becoming free, universal moral agents coincides with our theoretical interest in gaining knowledge about the natural and social conditions that shape us." This suggests that an emancipatory praxis that embraces discourse ethics could become a medium of validating competing validity claims in the operations of firms and perhaps macro-constitutional entities.

The methodology of discourse ethics and the universalization principle "U" are superior abstract notions of freedom that place a premium on liberty versus justice, including those suggesting by the philosopher Robert Nozick (Ingram, 1987). One would argue here that through discourse ethics, participants are able to arrive at a consensual agreement about an issue at hand (like the question of how to curb corruption, for example), or at least arrive at some sort of mutual understanding of each other's viewpoints and epistemological situations.

Hence, such a dialogic and learning process is inherent in the very nature of moral and ethical discussions in organizations. Moon (1995) has suggested that Habermas's conception of communicative or discourse ethics is in a way more ambitious than the moral theory put forward by Rawls. The author further suggested that Habermas sought establish the moral constraints that Rawls takes for granted (p. 145). Moral arguments according to Habermas should not be made in the form of deduction, they must be made in the form of argumentation analogues to the principle of induction for empirical questions. This principle he refers to as the principle of universalization ("U") (p. 149). In this light, every valid norm is expected to fulfill the condition that

All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests ( and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation ( p. 149).

The process of argumentation under the universalization principle ("U") (p. 149) must include the following propositions:

- 1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
- 2) Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- 3) Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- 4) Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
- 5) No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down above.

The above propositions add up to the view that a contested norm cannot meet with the consent of the participants in a practical discourse if the principle of universalization ("U") is not satisfied. Abizabeh (2005) has intimated that Habermas introduced his principle of universalization ("U") as a response to Kant's categorical imperative. Murphy (1994, p. 115) paraphrasing Habermas, indicates that the principle of 'U' redefines what is moral thus suggesting that moral questions are those that can be debated rationally.

Abizabeh (2005) claimed that Habermas's discourse ethics applied to what has been termed morally justified norms of action, which means it applies to rules " that specify whether an action is morally obligatory, permissible, or forbidden." Rasmussen (1990) alluded to the fact that the aim of discourse ethics was to

produce a consensus, which assumes a certain kind of symmetry and reciprocity defined by an equal opportunity to make wishes and feelings known

Discourse ethics may be said to provide a procedural justification for truth and validity claims. When one speaks of something being valid, one assumes a certain background consensus presupposing comprehensibility, truth, correctness or appropriateness, truthfulness or authenticity... (p. 64).

Abizabeh argues that like R. M. Hare's moral theory, Habermas's discourse ethics is a two-level moral theory (2005, p. 197). He also agrees with Shelly Kegan that all moral theories can be analyzed into the factorial and foundational levels (p. 197). The principle of universalization ("U") or discourse ethics is perceived as operating at the foundational level, not factorial level. The reason for this assumption is that a factorial theory seeks to justify actions, whereas a foundational theory seeks to justify norms of action. Abizabeh thus suggests that:

An action is right just in case it conforms to a justified norm appropriately applied. Obviously, then, the primary evaluative focal point of Habermas's foundational theory is moral norms. Practical discourses of justification do not seek to justify actions entirely but seek to justify norms of action, according to which actions are in turn morally evaluated (p. 198).

Elaborating extensively on the central principle of universalization as a foundational theory, Abizabeh further notes:

And the substance of his factorial theory is deontological in Kegan's sense: On Habermas's view, an action is right (whether morally permitted or required) just in case it is permitted or required by a justified norm... the question is, of course, how norms are to be justified, and here we come to the foundational level of Habermas's theory. It is at this second, foundational level Habermas introduces the principle of universalization ("U") (p. 198).

Habermas (Murphy III, 1994, p. 116) has posited that the principle of 'U' "acts like a knife that makes razor sharp cuts between evaluative statements and normative ones, or between the good and the just." This sentiment is elaborated further upon in the following passage:

Habermas believes that the moral principle 'U' through its requirements that all concerned must accept the consequences and side effects for everyone's interests that a proposed norm's universal observance can be anticipated to have provided the best means for distinguishing evaluative questions (those questions which cannot be resolved consensually) from moral questions... 'U' can only work, however, through the engagement of participants in an actual practical discourse. The need for actual discourse reflects Habermas's belief that the formal nature of "U" (and the subsequently derived "D") requires the content derived from an actual context be introduced before any moral conclusions can be drawn (p. 116).

Some authors, including Seyla Benhabib, reject Habermas's core idea of discourse ethics and the universalization principle that for a norm to be valid all affected participants must freely accept the consequences and side effects "that the general observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual" (Moon, 1995, p. 154). Both Benhabib and Agnes Heller (p. 112) have focused part of their criticism of Habermas on his distinction between the just and the good in the context of the reconstruction of social democracy.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the challenge of business ethics and moral philosophers in Africa is to generate hypotheses that fit both the conditions of universalization and the finest traditions in indigenous social and cultural norms such as the principle of Ubuntu. This is the theoretical challenge that the collaboration hypothesis attempts to meet. The specific Habermasian features of the collaboration hypothesis assume as Garcia-Marza has indicated in paraphrasing Habermas "negotiations, compromises, and agreements that demand moral validity also arise within most civil institutions, including small and large firms." (*emphasis added*). The next section examines these issues.

### **Collaboration as a Moral Framework for Action and Organizational Change**

The collaboration hypothesis is a framework for moral action and organizational change. It is essentially undergirded by the collaboration curve and the acceleration principle. The collaboration curve leads to the acceleration of the forces and factors of production that define organizational performance in a profit-maximizing context. It is based on a hypothesis, which posits that the performance of firms is directly proportional (*ceteris paribus*) to the degree of stakeholder participation in the social and strategic decisions of

firms. One should also note intrinsic to this formulation are vital strategic questions of legitimacy and economics (Jones, 1995). The collaborative curve and the corresponding acceleration principle will be presented later.

One should observe here that other theorists have referred to the issue of legitimacy as a major factor in firms' corporate performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011). Jones (1995) for his part claimed that cooperativeness and trustworthiness can lead to a significant competitive advantage. While collaboration theory is ubiquitous in social psychology (Levine & Moreland, 2004), it is yet to gain root in the fields of management and business communication.

This article is a humble attempt to fill some of this void. Hence, the collaboration curve has been put forward in this article as explaining a phenomenon that exists as a form of linear relationship between two central variables: that encompass the communication function and the efficiency function. The collaboration curve is also a product of a careful discernment of aspects of micro foundations, critical stakeholder theory, and discourse ethics.

These sources, in effect, undergird the theoretical foundations of the collaboration curve and its corresponding hypothetical assumptions. As briefly noted above, one should further note that the collaboration curve is built on a teleological ethical doctrine (in contrast to Kantian deontology) that subscribes to an ideal state of human interaction through rational speech. In this context, it signals a shift that is synonymous with Habermas's reading of Kant as aptly noted by Borradori (2003):

In Habermas's reading these conditions limit Kant's conception of the public sphere within monological boundaries. Monologism refers to the idea that the individual's participation in the public sphere is limited to the simple sharing of her already constituted opinions and moral decisions. In the monological perspective, moral reasoning is defined as a hypothetical conversation with oneself (or with an imaginary listener) (p. 59).

The collaboration curve is further a natural reflection of the African experience. And it can also form a platform for understanding reciprocity, convergent and divergent thinking, learning and other factors that constitute the dynamics of firm's performance (Levine & Moreland, 2005, p. 166). Thus, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1988), viewed the individual within the African setting as possessing of both a communal sensibility and a concept of self and volition. He describes the African social order as amphibious, manifesting features of both community and individuality.

Senghor (1963) echoed these views in the 1960s; when he regarded traditional society as a society where the group could have priority over the individual without crushing him. Senghor suggested that through dialogue and reciprocity, the individual could blossom within the framework of group and communal solidarity. These philosophical precepts are reinforced by the principle of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is an African philosophical belief that states that 'I am because we are', a belief also rooted in collectivist aspirations and approaches embedded in African culture and organizational practice. (Nkomo & Kriek, 2011, p. 462). In furtherance of this perspective, Mbiti (Lassiter, 1999) posits that the individual lacks latitude for self-determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community. This is how Mbiti (ibid) describes this collectivist and collaborative viewpoint:

Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man." (p.4)

The premises of Ubuntu, which also form one of the pillars of the collaboration hypothesis, are somewhat consistent with Adler's psychological dispositions. Adler, the founder of individual psychology, proposed to avoid the reductionism and determinism of Sigmund Freud by putting forward an overarching theory of social interest (Rich & Devitis, 1985). Adler described egocentric strivings as neurotic and thus counter-productive to his value system. Consequently, he embraced cooperation as a prime motive force.

Adler viewed cooperation as a "necessary invention in man's evolution." (p. 25). Thus, Adler provides some albeit unsystematic psychological basis of the morality of collaboration and its epistemological underpinnings. The collaboration hypothesis and its curve amplify a normative perspective and also satisfy the

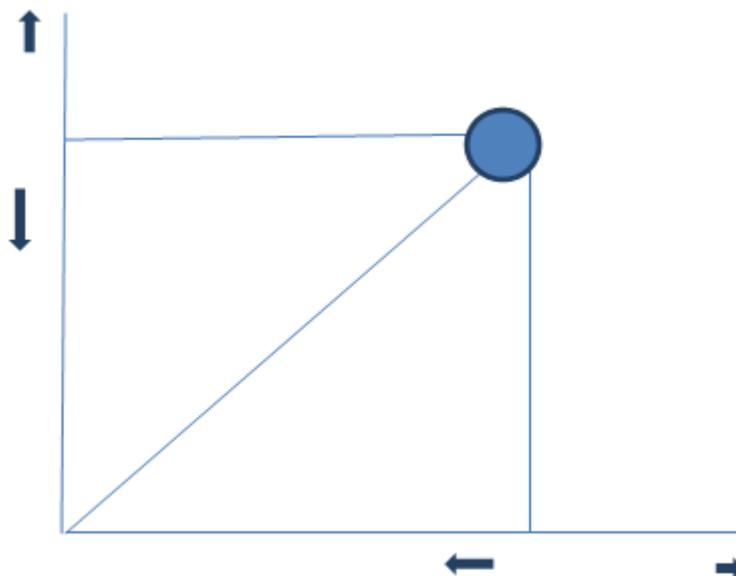
requirements of individual and group motivation that leads to efficiency in terms of micro performance of firms.

This article proposes, on the basis of the workings of the collaboration hypothesis, that where there is an absence of motivation due to participants feeling a sense of alienation, a breakdown of trust between management and workers might ensue. Such a breakdown of trust between stakeholders might also be the result of distortions in communication caused by various species of strategic action (Young, 1990).

Young has also indicated that in strategic action illocutions are used as a means to an end other than reaching understanding about normative claims regarding right conduct (p. 106). This is so because the activity of a business organization by its very nature demands a cooperative process in a situation, which could best be described as one of apparently unstable balance (Garcia-Marza, 2012). This view captured by Garcia-Marza (2012) is presented as follows:

From the perspective of this set of expectations, the company clearly appears as a permanently unstable balance of different interests with a clear difference in the capacities and opportunities available to satisfy these interest (p. 107).

And such an outcome might suggest a corresponding diminishing of organizational performance. Readers should examine the diagram below to see how the collaboration curve affects other factors relative to the economic and social performance of firms; and ultimately the communities in which they operate.



**Figure 1.1** Collaboration Curve

The y-axis represents both actual (↓) and potential (↑) firm or organizational performance and the x-axis represents variable collaboration (X) on the basis of critical stakeholder principles. Hence, the curve shows that as the degree of collaboration increases, so does the performance of firms. The collaboration curve was constructed with Alfred Marshall's marginalist principles that undergird the ubiquitous supply curve in modern economic textbooks (see Bucholz, 1989). Like firm performance (represented on the x-axis), collaboration could be actual (←) as well as potential (→). The collaboration curve attempts to demonstrate the presence of a linear relationship between a stakeholder management approach and firm or organizational performance.

That these variables might be linked in various magnitudes have been confirmed to some extent by several recent empirical studies (see for example, Jane, 2005; Chiu and Sharfman, 2011). Indeed, Jane (2005) reports that collaboration and change management are stronger influences of organizational effectiveness, than for example, management procedures and board performance. Other scholars (Hogg, 1994), working in the field of social psychology, including Levine and Moreland (2004) sought to analyze the social processes of group cohesiveness, creativity and scientific collaboration. Levine and Moreland underscored the critical role played

in collaboration by shared cognition and group problem solving in their reference to Ferrell's (2011) definition of collaboration circles:

A collaboration circle is a primary group consisting of peers who share similar occupational goals and who, through long periods of dialogue and collaboration, negotiate a common vision that guides their work. The vision consists of a shared set of assumptions about their discipline, including who constitutes good work, how to work, what subjects are worth working on, and how to think about them...For a group of scientists, it might be a new theoretical paradigm. Each member comes to play an informal role in the circle, and each role may have a history as the group develops over time. Even while working alone, the individual members are affected by the group and the roles they play in it ( p. 165).

Ferrell's aforementioned description may also apply to collaboration among group members and work teams in a variety of contexts. In a much recent work by Chun, Sandoval and Arens (2011, p. 190) the authors listed the benefits of collaboration between the public and the government. What the collaboration curve advanced presented in this article demonstrates is that forms of variable collaboration in firms can lead to increased organizational performance. It also demonstrates, however, that there is a saturation point at which the microeconomic marginal returns to a given collaboration approach as a motivational strategy is closer zero.

This is a point at which intrinsic motivation to act in ways that result in the development of shared objectives through convergent thinking in supportive organizational climate gradually declines (Levine and Moreland, 2004). This tension, in part, suggests the existence of an adverse equilibrium process at the 90° angle around the collaboration curve. The very mechanics of this process, on the one side, can exert a downward pressure as indicated by the arrow(↓ [on the y-axis]) that can decrease a momentum toward collaboration as a strategic, operational and social imperative.

Thus, one would suggest that such pressures might lead to lower organizational performance (Davila et al, 2006, p. 204). And the resultant might be a deceleration in the economic and social performance of organizations, other things being equal. Under these conditions, performance starts to decline before it approaches its potential level. On the other side, if the factors engendering the operation of deliberative principles are not impaired, the performance of the organization can be enhanced. This fact, which perhaps indicates a positive collaboration effect, has been alluded to by the economist, Harvey Leibenstein in *Allocative Efficiency vs. X-Efficiency* (1966, pp. 392-401). What Leibenstein suggests in this seminar article is that there may be more to the determination of output than previously observable output.

Thus, it is suggested that when considering output, one should also examine the nature of management, the incentives it employed, and the environment in which it operates as significant variables. This leads to the conclusion that motivation may be a major element in what Liebenstein dubbed *X-Efficiency*. The accentuation of deliberative and discursive principles can mark a process of acceleration that ensures that performance attains its highest potential. On the basis of this conclusion, one could suggest intuitively that processes of organizational collaboration are a reaffirmation of the acceleration principle.

The aforementioned analysis describes the process of organizational growth on the basis of collaboration in accordance with normative stakeholder principles. Thus, this article holds that the operational assumptions of the collaboration curve presented above are consistent with some of the basic assumptions of normative stakeholder theory (Moon, 1995; Reed, 1999; Borradori, 2003). Hence, when the collaboration curve is written as a linear differential equation, this equation could assume a standard bracketed form such as:

$\{L\{y(c)\} = f(c)\}$  where:

**L** = linear operator

**Y (C)** = function of collaboration

**F** = source term.

In specific experimental conditions, the collaboration hypothesis could be tested through the application of causal forecasting models using multiple regression statistical techniques (Collier and Evans, 2015). Judgmental forecasting could also be used as a viable analytic tool (p.239). The collaboration curve is further consistent with Fleming's (2008) assumptions that the empirical studies of firms can lead to a profit-sacrificing, bounded rational model.

Thus, a profit sacrificing model attaches importance to profits but the stockholder does not receive all the profits, as other stakeholders are considered and appropriately rewarded. This underlines the importance of corporate governance structures and practices that lead to greater concerns for multiple stakeholders.

The collaboration curve and the hypothesis, which it signifies, presuppose that stakeholders can engage in discourse as a means of developing a moral framework for action-oriented norms. All participants in this process can accept the consequences of this process if the five conditions of the universalization principle ("U") are met.

The article further claims that the principle of reciprocity and democratic accountability embedded in free expression of this kind can foster collaboration and enhance organizational performance. This article suggests that reciprocity and accountability; that form the essential pillar of discourse ethics might also be enlisted as armories in the fight against corruption, distorted communication, and the hegemonic use of power and privilege in sub-Saharan Africa.

One would submit, on the basis of the above thesis, that the collaboration hypothesis and its counter-hegemonic features present effective antidote that curbs some of the excesses of the ideology of pure managerial capitalism. This is a form of capitalism that puts the interest of stockholders over those of stakeholders (Reed, 1990). Hence, the collaboration hypothesis, due to its embrace of the principles of individual and collective empowerment through discourse ethics, makes it a viable platform for refashioning the philosophy of management in sub-Saharan Africa in the modern epoch.

### Conclusion

The views expressed in this article reinforced one principal notion. And that is the fact that the voices of stakeholders should be heard in regulating interpersonal affairs and conflicts in the context of the operations of firms. Hence, the article upheld the view that the basic question as to which way to proceed in determining a proper fit between the profit motive of firms and the long-term welfare of ordinary citizens must be decided upon through discursive processes of legitimation. One of the objectives of this exercise was to demonstrate how the collaboration curve forms a basis for understanding some of the most aspects of the empirical activities of firms. And that is the nature of organizational collaboration and its consequences. It is suggested that collaboration through rational discourse can amplify a positive feedback loop akin to double loop learning and consistent with the desire to ensure efficiency and adherence to ethical norms and standards of right conduct. The tentative natures of the views posited here suggest that the collaboration hypothesis and its operational assumptions require further empirical testing. Hence, the article acknowledges the need to advance these discussions through additional research. The article proposed several analytic tools that could be used in furtherance of such research program.

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