Paradigmatic reflections in cross-cultural management to make sense of a VUCA world

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the concept of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) in the field of cross-cultural management.

Design/methodology/approach – The related literature has been analysed from various paradigmatic lenses.

Findings – As the VUCA world concept originates from business circles, several key articles were published in non-academic journals. Two distinct groups of publications can be identified: consulting literature and academic literature on the VUCA world. While both consulting literature and academic literature about the VUCA world can be associated with functionalism, alternative research paradigms can easily accommodate new studies in connection with the VUCA world: interpretive, critical and postmodern works would fit the features of the VUCA world, along with multi-paradigm studies.

Research limitations/implications – It is advisable to investigate emergent contemporary issues, often labelled VUCA, according to multiple paradigms and to conduct multi-paradigmatic research.

Originality/value – While consulting literature on the VUCA world implicitly assumes functionalist paradigms, academic literature might provide alternative assumptions. Interpretative, critical and postmodern paradigms more accurately address the issues raised by VUCA.

Keywords Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (VUCA), Functionalism, Positivism, Interpretivism, Constructivism, Critical management studies, Postmodernism, Research paradigms

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed our world. We are learning to live in a way we could not imagine before 2020. Assumptions about globalization, mobility, interculturalism and expatriate lifestyles have undergone a profound transformation, and nobody could have foreseen these radical shifts. Many businesses have been challenged, travel was minimized during the lockdowns and global trade had to be reorganized. This radical shift is one typical example of a world marked by VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity). Discussion of VUCA has been illustrated by modest examples compared to the recent changes we have witnessed. All these events have an impact on cross-

cultural management, but the VUCA concept and cross-cultural management have rarely been discussed together, cross-cultural management being defined as working (and living) within, across and between cultures (Mahadevan, 2017).

Volatile, unpredictable and quick transformations have previously appeared, but the scale of change in several aspects of life and the fact that it was not previously predictable makes this shift immense. Uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity have often been mentioned as significant characteristics of our time, but their extent has been exaggerated. There is no better time to understand a VUCA world from an academic point of view than today. Cross-cultural management, international business and their connected competencies will not be the same as before the 2020s.

Until recently, the academic literature has scarcely considered the phenomenon of a VUCA world, while the consulting literature has already been preoccupied with the VUCA world for over a decade (Aghina *et al.*, 2017; Chinn *et al.*, 2019; Darino *et al.*, 2019; Dowdy *et al.*, 2017; Dowdy and Rieckhoff, 2017; McDonald, 2011; Wolstencroft and Kirkland, 2015). It has become an acknowledged concept in international business and management in the past couple of years (Hall and Rowland, 2016; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2018), but most studies have included the concept of a VUCA world as the context of the studied phenomenon (Cascio and Boudreau, 2016; Ciravegna *et al.*, 2023; Fan *et al.*, 2021; Ferraris *et al.*, 2022; Hartwell and Devinney, 2021; Maletzky and Grosskopf, 2020; Osland *et al.*, 2020; Puhr and Müllner, 2022 Thams and Dau, 2023; Tarba *et al.*, 2023), most referring to Bennett and Lemoine (2014a, 2014b) or Van Tulder *et al.* (2019). Top international business journals mention the VUCA world, but mainly in commentaries (Buckley, 2020; Cui *et al.*, 2023; Li and Fleury, 2020; Vertinsky *et al.*, 2023) or editorials (Bader *et al.*, 2019; Bass and Grøgaard, 2021; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Hennart and Verbeke, 2022; Luo, 2024; Tung *et al.*, 2023), and from a retrospective (Goerzen *et al.*, 2023; Vahlne and Johanson, 2020), point (Contractor, 2022), counterpoint (Calabro *et al.*, 2022) or perspective (Li *et al.*, 2022; Petricevic and Teece, 2019). While those article types have had a significant impact on the academic discussion, they are not research articles. Among the academic articles, Bader *et al.* (2019), Bennett and Lemoine (2014a, 2014b), Buckley (2020), Petricevic and Teece (2019), Saleh and Watson (2017) and Taskan *et al.* (2022) have given a relatively detailed explanation of the concept. At the same time, all previously published articles on the VUCA world lack the reflection on research paradigms. Whether the VUCA world phenomenon could be analysed from multiple paradigm perspectives has never been investigated. Functionalist, positivist approaches dominate the debate on the VUCA phenomenon. However, it is relevant to uncover the insights from other paradigm perspectives, such as interpretive or critical perspectives. Postmodernism would be particularly valid, as many characteristics seems to coincide, and ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty have been frequently mentioned in connection with postmodernism. Beyond that, a multi-paradigmatic perspective is worth considering with regard to this phenomenon.

In this paper, the phenomenon of a VUCA world will first be explored including both consulting and academic literature. The paradigms in cross-cultural management will then be presented. This will be followed by a multi-paradigmatic perspective on the VUCA world. Finally, the discussion and conclusion analyse what the different paradigm perspectives, including multi-paradigmatic studies, mean in the VUCA world. Finally, future directions are outlined.

VUCA world: theoretical overview
Our world has been labelled a VUCA world for years (Buckley, 2020; Petricevic and Teece, 2019). Business practitioners, including organizational leaders and consultants, often refer to

the business environment as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – that is, VUCA (Aghina *et al.*, 2017; Chinn *et al.*, 2019; Darino *et al.*, 2019; Dowdy *et al.*, 2017; Dowdy and Rieckhoff, 2017; McDonald, 2011; Wolstencroft and Kirkland, 2015). Most often they claim that the four characteristics are simultaneously relevant in our context (Hall and Rowland, 2016). While the expression derives from the business community, academic researchers have had two distinct responses to it: a large group of social scientists have neglected the idea and not considered the concept seriously as it was created by consultants to sell their own consulting services, while a smaller group of academics have included the concept in their argument without any criticism (Buckley, 2020; Maletzky and Grosskopf, 2020; Petricevic and Teece, 2019). Not many social science studies have actually investigated whether the diagnosis is true for our world. Despite its general truth, no studies are available to give scientific evidence of where and when VUCA characteristics are present. Bennett and Lemoine (2014a, 2014b), however, have investigated whether the four distinct attributes are necessarily present in parallel or if they can be traced independently of each other. Although business leaders and consultants often use the four characteristics together as an acronym, they remain distinct concepts.

Volatility refers to quick changes in unpredictable velocity, but the situation might not be overly complex. It includes the pace of change, the volume of change and the turbulence change creates (Saleh and Watson, 2017). Taskan *et al.* (2022) list themes of previous publications in connection with volatility and change; uncertainty, unpredictability, dynamics and instability are often mentioned. Fuel prices are an often-cited example, as these can change quickly and when those changes will take place remains fundamentally unpredictable (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b). The recent energy price crisis in Europe due to Russia's war in Ukraine is a typical example. Retrospectively, most analysts can explain when and why some changes in global politics and economy have influenced prices, but it can be the result of complex and even contradictory situations, while the fact of the price change remains simple. The other important factor in volatility is the frequency of changes. Market actors know that they cannot expect stable prices, and they are also aware of information that might influence fuel prices, but the changes remain unpredictable and recurrent.

Uncertainty refers to lack of knowledge and information, which leads to a lack of understanding and an unpredictable future. While volatility focuses on change, uncertainty might include the lack of any change (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b). Taskan *et al.* (2022) highlight unpredictability, lack of information about outcomes and generally unknown aspects and circumstances of a situation. Anti-terrorist preparations are an often-used example of uncertainty: it is impossible to collect information about the exact time and place of a terrorist attack, although huge efforts are devoted to doing so. Even with relatively low levels of information, preparations for unlikely but still possible events require sources, as the consequences of a terrorist attack are fatal and intense. Stockpiling unnecessary tools might be a possible preparation. Flexibility is often mentioned in response to uncertainty, but flexibility has low applicability in extreme situations such as terrorist attacks. A more business-compatible example is when a fundamental innovation is launched on the market. Business leaders become used to rather exact market predictions when introducing a new product, but with a fundamentally novel product, these traditional market surveys might fail.

Complexity refers to numerous aspects of a situation, particularly when these aspects are interconnected in a complicated way (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b). Complexity does not mean that something is impossible to understand, but rather that it requires time, energy and intellectual capacity to understand all aspects and their effects on the given situation. As it is not always possible to devote the necessary time and intellectual capacity to analyse a situation, this might lead to uncertainty, but it should not. Taskan *et al.* (2022) associate

complexity with the quality of factors to analyse relations between factors, confounding, chaos and confusion. An often-cited example is when a small, informal organization grows: after reaching a certain size, it is impossible to maintain the same management practice as before. Complexity can be dealt with by dividing the organization into functions with responsible leaders or by formalizing processes.

Ambiguity refers to doubt about the cause and effect relationships in a situation. Ambiguity might not involve any swift changes and might include future uncertainty, but the emphasis is rather on causes, and it might be complex or not so complex. Confusion about the options in a situation, the diversity of potential results and a lack of clarity about the potential outcome are typical to ambiguous situations (Saleh and Watson, 2017). The focus is on the lack of knowledge about the basic "rules of the game", and there is no precedent for making predictions of what to expect (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b). Taskan *et al.* (2022) associate ambiguity with an inability to understand and interpret, lack of clarity, multiple interpretations, uncertainty and confounding. The industrial revolution implied tremendous changes in technology, work and society; we might expect similar changes from the digital revolution, but there is fundamental opacity about what exactly it will entail in management.

Literature on VUCA characteristics (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b; Saleh and Watson, 2017; Taskan *et al.*, 2022) often builds on examples from outside the discipline of cross-cultural management, namely from the field of international business. After all, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are inherent in intercultural situations. In classic cross-cultural management, cultures are assumed to be relatively stable (Hofstede, 1980), so it is debatable whether volatility is a typical characteristic of cross-cultural management.

However, if contemporary cross-cultural management moves beyond its traditional focus on national cultures, where cultures were used as quasi-synonyms of countries (Mahadevan, 2023), *volatility* might be considered relevant. When we depart from the outdated perspective of clear-cut, objectively predetermined national or societal cultural borders (Mahadevan and Primecz, 2024) and define culture as consisting of shared, learned characteristics arising from belonging to a certain group and situated in a given context (Mahadevan, 2017), we can assume that everybody belongs to multiple groups. Their nationality is only one of these groups. Indeed, for many people, it is not even the most important, especially when they have been socialized in more than one national culture, which is increasingly the case in our contemporary, globalized world. The growing presence of migration and individual mobility (Mahadevan and Primecz, 2024) may actually cause volatility to emerge. Cultural characteristics, moreover, can change rapidly in exceptional situations. For example, the present war in Gaza triggered radical changes in many individuals' sense of justice, and cultural divides shifted. This might be considered *volatility* in culture, and consequently in cross-cultural management. It was unforeseeable that this specific political situation would create a new cultural division among people who might have previously shared the same political inclinations, but it is possible to explain it retrospectively.

Bennett and Lemoine (2014a, 2014b) have argued that a good response to volatility is agility, to uncertainty is information, to complexity is restructuring and to ambiguity is experimentation. Schoemaker *et al.* (2018) go further and insist that dynamic capabilities are needed. Leadership in a VUCA world requires abilities such as being able to anticipate, challenge and interpret, which are cognitive skills. At the same time, the ability to decide and align is necessary, which builds on emotional and social intelligence. Finally, the authors argue that the ability to learn is essential.

Paradigmatic reflection is needed. Paradigms in cross-cultural management

Burrell and Morgan (1979) defined four research paradigms as they organized existing social and organizational theories according to the philosophy of science and theory of society. They

argued that every researcher has implicit or explicit assumptions about how science and societies work. The authors organized social and organizational theories into a 2×2 matrix in which the horizontal dimension dealt with the philosophy of science and the vertical dimension focused on the nature of society. Ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology define the philosophy of science, which can be either subjective or objective. The two ends of the nature of society are determined by the researcher's focus on order or conflict in societies. These two dimensions define four research paradigms: functionalism, interpretivism, radical humanism and radical structuralism, as illustrated in Figure 1.

While the Burrell and Morgan (1979) taxonomy is highly influential, given its aptly chosen dimensions, social science and organizational theory have since developed. While functionalism and interpretivism were frequently quoted, radical humanism and radical structuralism were rarely mentioned and were often considered to be two sides of the same coin: the critical paradigm (Primecz, 2020). At the same time, a new paradigm emerged in the 1990s: postmodernism. It is impossible to position postmodernism within the Burrell and Morgan (1979) matrix. Deetz (1996) criticized and revised the Burrell−Morgan matrix, organizing these influential thought systems into a comprehensive framework and calling them discourses, as illustrated in Figure 2. Tsoukas and Knudsen (2003) also built their influential organizational theory handbook around four paradigmatic positions: positivism, interpretivism, postmodernism and the critical paradigm.

Positivism (Donaldson, 2003), or functionalism, is the most widespread paradigm or discourse in management studies. Gioia and Pitre (1990) visually presented the dominance of functionalism over the other four paradigms. Our conventional knowledge about organizations, management and, more precisely, cross-cultural management is predominantly positivist and functionalist. Researchers following this paradigm assume that society is in order and in consensus, and their theories do not question the existing societal system. Functionalist or
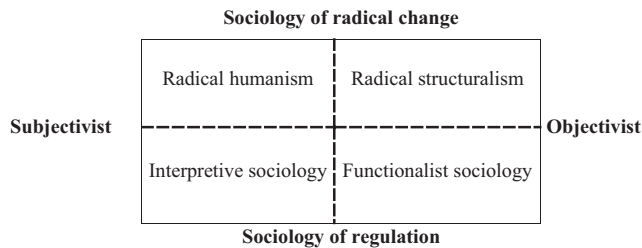

Figure 1.
Four paradigms of organization studies

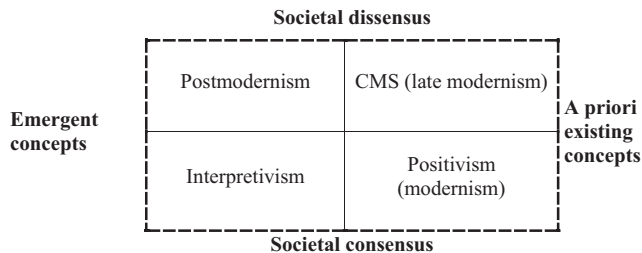**Source:** Based on Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 22)

Figure 2.
Four discourses in Deetz matrix

Source: Based on Deetz (1996, p. 1998)

positivist theories are based on an objectivist ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. Theorists often follow natural science as a role model when they develop their scientific models, and statistical methods are the preferred research tools. In cross-cultural management, the widespread use of dimensional models, such as Hofstede (1980), GLOBE [1] (House *et al.*, 2004), Schwartz (1994), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) and their ancestors Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) all build on the assumptions of functionalism: they use large-scale samples and statistical evidence. The concept of cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003) builds on the same assumptions but focuses on individuals. Qualitative methods such as the Kulturstandard method (Thomas *et al.*, 2003) can be applied in a functionalist way (see Topçu *et al.*, 2007), and the well-known grounded theory method can be applied in a positivist way (see Charmaz, 2005).

Interpretivism (Hatch and Yanow, 2003) and constructivism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) can be considered one paradigm; like positivism, this paradigm builds on order in society. Researchers in this paradigm do not question the existing social order, which means that the nature of society is characterized by consensus. At the same time, it fundamentally differs in its philosophy of science from the previous paradigm because it builds on a subjectivist ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. Hatch and Yanow (2003) argue that the natural and social worlds differ as objects of scrutiny because natural science objects do not think about the research phenomenon, so they can be investigated quasi-independently, while social science objects are human beings who have their own opinions about research and consequently cannot be investigated independently. This is why the natural sciences cannot be a role model for the social sciences: investigated human beings cannot be separated from researchers – they influence each other, and objectivity cannot be assumed. In the vocabulary of interpretivism and constructivism, subjectivity is not a mistake but a reality which should be consciously dealt with in the research process with the help of reflexivity. Cross-cultural management, with its roots in anthropology (Geertz, 1973), applies an interpretive methodology more often (Barmeyer *et al.*, 2019; D'Iribarne *et al.*, 2020; Romani *et al.*, 2011) than other organizational and management disciplines.

Critical management studies build on radical humanism (Willmott, 2003) and radical structuralism; it is a big tent of critical ideas, including Marxist, post-Marxist, postmodernist, feminist, ecological, irreductionist, critical realist and postcolonial thinkers (Adler, 2002). The major concern of critical management researchers is radical social change, because they diagnose existing societies as being in crisis, which should be overcome by the new social order. The agenda of critical management researchers is not only to investigate and understand social and organizational phenomena, but also to help people on the periphery to improve their life to create a more just, fair and right society. Critical scholars focus on dissensus in society. Critical ideas are relatively rare in cross-cultural management, despite the recent growth in the field (Mahadevan *et al.*, 2020; Romani *et al.*, 2018a, b; Romani *et al.*, 2020). Critical ideas emerged first in international business dealing with postcolonial issues (Jack and Westwood, 2009), and in language management (Vaara *et al.*, 2005). Power differences and their impact on intercultural relations are a major concern in critical cross-cultural management. The current world order is a result of practices of colonization in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries that resulted in massive inequalities among countries; consequently, representatives of powerful and powerless countries in intercultural situations are associated with power and knowledge or lack of power and knowledge.

Postmodern ideas in organizational and management studies peaked in the 1990s. Wider social sciences, sociology and cultural studies inspired management scholars to frame their ideas about organizations and societies within the postmodernist discourse. Chia (2003, p. 114) asked whether postmodernism is a "cynical nihilistic tendency in contemporary thought" or a

"subtle and complex attempt at reworking the metaphysical bases of modern knowledge". Kelemen and Rumens (2008) describe postmodernity as being characterized by fluidity, ambiguity, plurality, a literary language, non-linear development, localization of knowledge and non-causal relationships. Postmodern ideas in Deetz's (1996) taxonomy share commonalities with critical discourse in their view on society: both critical management studies and postmodernism question the existing societal status quo and consequently focus on social dissensus. At the same time, postmodernism differs from mere critical thought because it emphasizes local knowledge and emerging themes in a way similar to interpretivism. Debate between the representatives of critical and postmodern thoughts lies in their approach to the Enlightenment: critical thinkers accept it, want to sustain its achievements and proceed with it, while postmodern thinkers view the Enlightenment as a fatal failure that should be stopped. Previously, postmodern theorizers Calás and Smircich (1999) claimed that postmodernity in management and organization studies is over, which is why they also state that it had a great impact on our understanding of organizations. Derrida, the postmodern philosopher, inspired many researchers to develop the method of deconstruction, which could be influential in international business and cross-cultural management, Fougère and Moulettes (2007) being an exemplar.

Multi-paradigmatic research in a VUCA world
The philosophical dilemma of subjectivist or objectivist epistemology, ontology, methodology and human nature seems to be confusing. The claim for objective science is appealing, while the argument for a clear distinction between the social and natural sciences is also convincing. Research results based on an objectivist methodology and ontology are persuasive. At the same time, the lived experiences of social actors cannot be denied. The arguments against and for objectivity and subjectivity appear to be equally strong (Bechara and van de Ven, 2011). Burrell and Morgan (1979) never questioned the verity of either epistemology, but rather argued for the equality of approaches.

The dilemma about the nature of society is also difficult to decide: either order or conflict dominates our societies. When we focus on certain aspects of society, order and the status quo seem to prevail; when we concentrate on marginalization, exploitation, oppression and subjugation, it is possible to find examples in organizations and at large, and conflict seems to prevail. Burrell and Morgan (1979) assume that the paradigms on the side of order and radical change paradigms are equally valid when social and organizational phenomena are described.

The choice in philosophy of science and philosophy of society is even more difficult when we assume that our world – including our organizations and our societies – is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Accepting the assumptions that each paradigm is equally valid, we can imagine exploring the world with the help of two or more paradigms. Multi-paradigmatic research was initiated with the idea of investigating complex organizational issues with the help of distinct and even contradictory paradigms (Hassard, 1991).

A multi-paradigmatic research strategy is a possible alternative to any solo paradigm research. The very existence of multi-paradigmatic research is often debated (see Scherer and Steinmann, 1999). Contradictory assumptions are often considered impossible to reconcile, and it is sometimes also debated if alternative paradigms are correct (Scherer and Steinmann, 1999); but when it is assumed that all paradigmatic positions are inherently correct and they just provide alternative world views (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), it is possible to imagine that distinct research insights are juxtaposed, and this creative tension provides in-depth understanding of the investigated social or organizational phenomenon.

Multi-paradigmatic research builds on studies conducted in distinct paradigms. It is not an uncontrolled mixture of contradictory assumptions, but rather a conscious and planned process of investigation. The distinct investigation is conducted within separate paradigmatic frames (Romani and Primecz, 2019). The chosen research problem can be approached from different paradigmatic angles, while the paradigmatic assumptions of the analyses are kept consistently in distinct paradigms. The same organizational or societal problem can be considered from a subjectivist and objectivist philosophy of science and from a societal order or radical change perspective (see Table 1).

The distinct research results can be handled as independent answers to the research question. This is called the parallel strategy. It is also possible to use the result of one paradigmatic study as input for in investigation following another paradigm. This is called the sequential strategy. It is also possible to go back and forth between two distinct sets of results, while cross-fertilization of ideas is considered (Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Lewis and Kelemen, 2002). This later approach is one of the most difficult, and philosophically the riskiest, approach as there is a potential danger of mixing up results derived from contradictory philosophical and societal assumptions (Romani and Primecz, 2019). Any attempt to integrate results from distinct paradigms and mix them without conscious reflection about how the results and assumptions are interconnected might lead to meaningless results.

While there are convincing arguments for analysing social and organizational phenomena from different paradigmatic angles in a VUCA world, it is also risky to consider paradigms superficially as approaches that can be mixed or integrated. Hassard and Kelemen (2002) have pointed out that many researchers are reluctant to include paradigmatic reflections in their studies. Some are unaware of the debate on the proliferation of paradigms and their incommensurability; others might be informed of such debates but do not see them as useful and practical when implementing their own studies. Beyond that, some researchers familiar with the paradigmatic terminology and argumentation consciously avoid relating their studies to paradigm communities because they might disapprove of some non-mainstream paradigmatic assumptions. They are "non-consumers" of the paradigm debate (Hassard and Kelemen, 2002), and their practice leads to several poor-quality research results where contradictory paradigmatic assumptions are randomly mixed.

The endeavour to integrate the results of studies conducted in distinct paradigms is also problematic, because eventually one paradigm will dominate, and paradigm plurality is halted by paradigm integration. While some researchers (e.g. Donaldson, 1998, 2003; Pfeffer, 1993) explicitly advocate paradigm integration in the name of discipline development, such integration favours stronger paradigms, and the potentially innovative non-mainstream

Method	Major characteristics	Exemplar
Parallel	Analysis is done separately in two (or more) distinct paradigms	Hassard (1991) Niittymies *et al.* (2022) Primecz *et al.* (2015)
Sequential	Analysis is done in one paradigm and the results of the first paradigm serve as input for the second paradigm	Lee (1991) Sanchez *et al.* (2023)
Interplay	Analysis is done separately in two (or more) paradigms and the results of the separate analyses then cross-fertilize each other without integrating the results	Gagnon *et al.* (2022) Romani (2010) Romani *et al.* (2011) Romani and Primecz (2019) Schultz and Hatch (1996)

Source: Based on Lewis and Grimes (1999) and Lewis and Kelemen (2002), with recent complements

Table 1.
Types of multi-paradigmatic
research

paradigms would be liquidated. Multi-paradigmatic studies maintain the integrity of paradigms (Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Lewis and Kelemen, 2002; Schultz and Hatch, 1996) and consequently are able to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the researched phenomena. Paradigm integration risks the fruits of multi-paradigmatic studies.

Discussion

Several postmodern theorists (Chia, 1995, 2003; Martin, 1992) have claimed that uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in organizations have been present since the 1990s. Volatility has been added to this list of characteristics since the turn of the millennium. The velocity of change seems to be growing, so the description of a VUCA world can be considered relevant. A functionalist approach might address the challenge of seeking efficient solutions while maintaining high organizational performance. Most consultant literature (see McKinsey and Company) formulates its recommendations based on mainstream management principles, highlighting that the VUCA concept is derived from the military world (Barber, 1992; Chinn et al., 2019; Dowdy and Rieckhoff, 2017). At the same time, it is present in for-profit organizations such as Procter and Gamble (McDonald, 2011; Wolstencroft and Kirkland, 2015). Dowdy et al. (2017) also point out that it can be implemented in the public sector. The concept of the agile organization responds very well to VUCA conditions (Aghina et al., 2017; Darino et al., 2019).

Academics, though, might address the issue differently. From an interpretive perspective, actors' views are the most important resource for understanding the situation. Uncertainty might be reduced by discovering all participants' motives and interpretations of the situation. Complexity can be better understood by in-depth analysis of various actors' perspectives. Ambiguity might be accepted, when it cannot be eliminated, by thoroughly reviewing the situation from different perspectives. This is just the first step, however. From an interpretive perspective, not only do individual actors play their role, but each organization and social situation develops its own meaning system, which is a result of interconnected relationships and a socially constructed reality. In an interpretive paradigm, it is not assumed that objective reality exists, but rather that it is created by the actors (Romani et al., 2011). As a theoretical implication, it can be highlighted that the task of the researcher would be to uncover the social processes that result in an understanding among the participants that the world is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. In this paradigm, the overall bases of the social world are not questioned. The major rules of social order are considered to be stable. As a potential practical implication for leadership, it means that leaders in a VUCA world cannot be assumed to have an independent objective view; rather, they should be engaged in a reflexive process where all actors participate in creating processes. This way, the leader alone is not able to control all aspects of the situation, but the leader can have an active role in creating a safe and reflexive environment for all participants.

From a critical perspective, VUCA is understood through social conflict (Romani et al., 2020). These characteristics in organizational and social life are explained by the tension between powerful and powerless members of the organization and society. Volatility might be a result of a lack of stability in the social order. Uncertainty is often experienced by marginalized members of the community. Complexity and ambiguity can be viewed differently by peripheral and marginalized parts of the society and organizations and by their powerful members. A VUCA world in general would be interpreted in light of power: who controls organizational resources and knowledge and whose interests are at the forefront. A potential implication for society is that while events such as a pandemic or terrorism are impossible to control fully and prevent people from their consequences, it is worth developing processes that help people to be prepared for unexpected situations. From a critical point of view, vulnerable members of the society are the most exposed to volatility,

uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, and this is why reducing inequalities and providing opportunities for disadvantaged social groups are of the utmost importance in our unpredictable social world.

Postmodernism plays with the phenomena of ambiguity, fluidity and complexity. While it is debateable whether we can consider our contemporary society postmodern or if we are beyond it (Calás and Smircich, 1999), it is notable that the characteristics of postmodern society and organizations are rather similar to the idea of a VUCA world. However, we can learn from postmodernism not to consider ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty as the source of problems, but rather as inspiring possibilities for future learning and to accept frequent changes − volatility, if you like − as a natural circumstance of our world.

This leads to the final insight from a multi-paradigmatic reflection on a VUCA world. Multi-paradigmatic studies might have the best chance of being meaningful in a VUCA world because they incorporate contradictory assumptions while bringing valuable comprehension from different paradigmatic angles without integrating them. Every paradigmatic community might contribute to our understanding of the VUCA world, while none of them has better insights than the others. See summary of approaches on Table 2.

Finally, a VUCA world might be understood better from the perspective of multiple paradigms as it is by nature complex, ambiguous, uncertain and rapidly changing. Each paradigm provides novel insight into the investigated organizational or social phenomena.

Paradigmatic position	Underlying assumptions	Concrete suggestions (existing and future possibilities)
Positivism (functionalism)	Objective reality, social order, cause and effect relationships	Agile organizations (Aghina et al., 2017; Darino et al., 2019; Dowdy and Rieckhoff, 2017); authentic leadership (Wolstencroft and Kirkland, 2015); innovation, dynamic capabilities and leadership (Schoemaker et al., 2018); further existing management tools
Interpretivism	Social construction of reality, social order, interpretations	Discovering all participants' motives and interpretations of the situation; in-depth analysis of various actors' perspectives; thoroughly reviewing the situation from different perspectives
Critical management studies	Objective reality, social inequalities, fundamental social changes are needed	Empowering marginalized groups of people within organizations and societies; careful reflection on power imbalances between, among and across cultures; historical and geopolitical forces to be uncovered
Postmodernism	Social construction of reality, social tension and dissensus, ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity	Learning to be open to ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty, and see them as inspiring possibilities for future learning, and to accept frequent changes − volatility, if you like − as a natural circumstance of our world
Multi-paradigm perspectives	Complexity is captured via multiple insights, solutions might arrive from several research directions, inner tension and contradiction are part of the endeavour	Incorporating contradictory assumptions while bringing valuable comprehension from different paradigmatic angles without integrating them

Source: Based on Aghina et al. (2017), Darino et al. (2019), Dowdy and Rieckhoff (2017), Schoemaker et al. (2018) and Wolstencroft and Kirkland (2015); and own synthesis of theoretical considerations and potential practical responses to VUCA challenges

Table 2.
Responses to VUCA
challenges

Rarely applied paradigms (e.g. critical studies) might be particularly relevant for application. The multi-paradigmatic approach is, by definition, designed for complex organizational and social phenomena, so it is especially recommended for a VUCA world. Paradigmatic pluralism is gaining recognition in organizational research and cross-cultural management. If a VUCA world is a valid description of our current global situation, it is undoubtedly leaving its functionalist quarantine and it is time for the application of alternative paradigms.

Conclusion and future directions

The aim of this conceptual paper was to offer understanding that the idea of a VUCA world was initiated by business circles, which originally borrowed the idea from the military world. This is a relatively new concept in business research, and academic publications in the post-COVID era seem to be more receptive to the idea of VUCA world. This indicates that a paradigmatic reflection on the published studies is worth considering. It seems that most studies use the concept only as context and within functionalist paradigmatic assumptions. At the same time, the VUCA world concept has more potential. Alternatives to functionalist research paradigms, such as interpretivist, critical and especially the postmodern approaches, resonate well with the VUCA world concept. Beyond that, a multi-paradigmatic research strategy seems also to be applicable when a VUCA world is considered. Multitudinous novel research possibilities open up in connection with the VUCA world concept despite its limited contemporary usage in international business and cross-cultural management.

Note

1. Both the Hofstede and GLOBE models have a dimension which refers to differences among cultures in relation to uncertainty avoidance, and uncertainty is part of the VUCA concept.

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