

DYNAMICS OF DIVERSITY

in an organisational environment



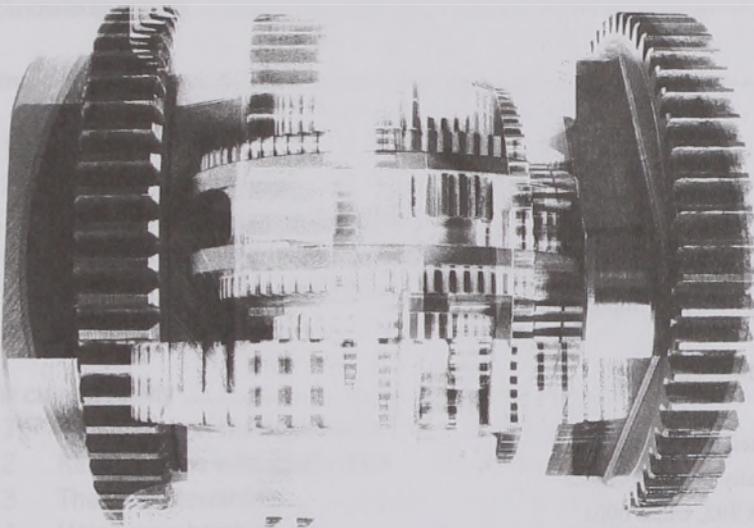
S HERSELMAN

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Introduction

1.1 Orientation

Sociocultural diversity is part of the South African way of life, yet policies of the previous government ensured separation and polarisation between different sociocultural groups. In recent times the face of sociocultural diversity in this country has changed and is undergoing further change, not only because of the 'opening up' of society since the democratic elections of 1994, but also as a result of fulfilment of affirmative action and legal requirements concerning equity in employment (Carrell & Elbert *et al* 1999:56, 63). Age, gender and racial compositions, sociocultural orientation, and education and training levels of employees in organisations have changed, as a result of which corporate South Africa is increasingly being characterised by the positioning of black persons in technical, administrative and managerial positions. Moreover, current demographic trends, together with global social, economic, political, technological and ecological forces that influence the contemporary organisational world, all to a greater or lesser extent have contributed to the change in sociocultural and demographic diversity and, therefore in workforce operations at all levels in organisations in South Africa. Such factors impact on an organisation's requirements, expectations, management styles, social policies and ultimately achievement of its objectives, and produce a need for research to be conducted on implications of the change. Conversely, in this context as well, the extent to which sociocultural aspects of a more traditional kind are influenced by or impact on systems of large-scale political economy (cf Marcus & Fischer 1986:77) should also be investigated. Besides the academic significance of a study such as this, it is an affirmation and valuation of workforce diversity, because valuing and promoting diversity constitute positive, pro-business activities rather than just reactions to the need to address legal and regulatory requirements.

There are as many definitions of the concept of diversity as there are books on the subject. Very broadly, diversity in organisational context is defined as 'the increasing heterogeneity of organisations with the inclusion of different groups' (Robbins 1998:13), but on closer evaluation the concept is far more complex than this definition suggests. In line with Carrell, Elbert *et al* (1999:50-51), in this study the concept is described more comprehensively with reference to different dimensions. The first, or primary dimensions, include people's readily observable physical traits, ie those with which people are born, which have a profound influence on their lives, and which are fundamental to their identities. According to the authors, people view the world in terms of these traits, but it is also on the basis of them that they are identified as belonging to particular groups which produce the noticeable diversity within organisations. Secondary dimensions, which include education, social responsibility, wealth, place of residence, income, marital status, belief systems, and work roles and positions, are more likely to change and provide depth and individuality to people's lives (cf Thomas 1991:xv). This diversity suggests participation in a range of formal and informal groups, including family and other kin-groups, unions and social clubs, political parties and religious groups, all of which shape and direct aspects of people's behaviour. Each person also brings different orientations to the work environment, and by implication the outside environment impacts on the formal organisation. Many matters pertaining to the diversity implied in the primary and secondary dimensions cannot be observed, and people's attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and behaviour regarding the work situation, their position and roles in relation to the organisation and to one another, work motivation, and ways in which they integrate personal, family, ethnic, professional and political aims and ambitions with their official roles and duties can only be deduced from observing their behaviour or from their ideas and views. This refers to the tertiary dimensions of diversity. Such matters are no less important than issues that are obvious to everyone, and in fact in some regards may even be more important, since it is often only by investigating covert issues that real meaning can be ascribed to matters which impact on the company and its key operations. Although due regard is paid to aspects of the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity, this study falls mainly within the ambit of the tertiary dimensions.

Given such diversity and because personal and official attitudes and behaviour do not necessarily correspond, conflicts and problems referred to as 'cultural collisions' (Kanu Kogod 1991:45) inevitably develop. A literature study and discussions with people in organisational environments confirmed this to be correct. In fact the literature refers to problems and conflicts ranging from feelings of marginality, problematic communication and alienation between categories of employees, to strained interpersonal relationships between organisation mem-

bers. Such issues are known to contribute to key occupational problems such as low morale and hence productivity, conflict and tension, absenteeism, high staff turnover and poor job satisfaction. Because of these it is easy to focus on problems and thus to underplay positive aspects of corporate life. This was not the intention of the research reported here, but because the former were repeatedly emphasised by research participants during the interviews, such matters receive considerable attention in conjunction with the human factors which contribute to the success of the company.

In accordance with this, the objectives of this research were to detect, investigate and look for meanings of various aspects of sociocultural diversity, particularly aspects which are not necessarily apparent to an observer, such as perceptual differences, attitudes and assumptions which one group makes of another, and their influence on behaviour within a particular business environment.

1.2 Research methodology

The qualitative ethnographic research methodology applied during the research constituted a first-hand study of a group of employees of a preselected business, ie a profit-seeking organisation, which combined various forms of analysis to generate rich descriptions of organisational realities to produce theoretical and comparative data. Through this enquiry in which research participants' experiences were personalised, it was possible to problematise the ways in which people construct the organisation on a daily interactional basis (Schwartzman 1993:45), and therefore to identify recurring themes which emerge as central issues in the organisation. The research consisted primarily of open-ended in-depth questioning of a number of participants to find answers to questions pertaining to

- life and career histories
- work responsibilities
- everyday activities and decisions and implications for activities of the organisation
- behavioural forms typical of the members of the organisation and reasons for the behaviour
- employees' understanding of the organisational environment
- the influence of employees' sociocultural orientation on behaviour, perceptions, and attitudes in the organisational environment

- formal and informal groupings among members of the organisation to accomplish particular tasks in pursuance of organisational objectives
- relationships between employees and their impact on activities of the organisation
- the bases for natural affinities between employees (eg language, age, gender, racial and ethnic commonalities, roles and positions) and their influence on organisational activity
- tensions or conflicts (overt and covert) within the organisational setting, their causes and impact on organisational activities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 of the 52 employees at a wholesale company in Gauteng where the research was undertaken in July 1999. For purposes of distinction between the different categories of employees, reference is made to the office personnel or staff, the 'traders' who are the loading controllers (the concept of 'trader' is a traditional name used amongst people involved in marketing) and the 'drivers', all of whom were black. 'Pilots', the term which is also used in the text, does not refer to employees of the company but to contract workers (2.5 below). All the interviews were held privately and only one employee was interviewed at a time. With a single exception, a research participant who requested that the interview be documented on paper rather than recorded, the interviews were recorded on tape and then transcribed.

The research was designed as a holistic anthropological inquiry. In preparation, a survey was made of available literature on the anthropological study of organisations, the meaning of (socio)cultural diversity and its relevance in organisational settings, management in organisations characterised by diversity, and sociocultural differences pertaining to the South African scene. (The reader is referred to the list of literature consulted for bibliographic details on the sources at the end of this report.) With the assistance of the director of a consulting company in Pretoria, permission was obtained from the managers of the company to undertake the research, with the agreement that on completion the report would be available for scrutiny by all interested parties, and that the names of the company and employees would not be identified.

One of the differences between ethnography and other forms of research is that ethnographers do not automatically assume that they know the right questions to ask in a research setting. In fact, in ethnographic fieldwork it is often necessary for questions and their answers to be discovered in the setting being studied (Schwartzman 1993:54). Accordingly, instead of a fixed set of predetermined questions, the interviews were based on a semi-structured interview schedule to direct the course of the interviews and to ensure that research partici-

pants were asked the same or similar questions to determine patterning in their responses. As the interviews proceeded, the interview schedule was adapted to accommodate the emerging differences in information supplied by different categories of employees because it became apparent that to obtain appropriate information it did not make sense to ask identical questions of the research participants in the different categories. Each employee has only a partial view of the organisation and thus describes it from his/her perspective (cf Jordan 1999:15). As is typical of anthropological research, the interviews were flexible, and participants were permitted to talk at length about issues important to them. A separate interview schedule was used for research participants in managerial positions in the belief that they were positioned to hold a somewhat different perspective of organisational activities from other employees.

The interviews started with questioning on issues such as previous experience, period of service, gender, marital status, ethnic affiliation, education level, and the number of persons supported on an employee's income. The information thus obtained was important to understand perceptions, attitudes, expectations, behaviour and perspectives in the organisational environment, and set the scene for more direct discussions of topics pertaining to sociocultural diversity during later stages of the interviews. Preliminary questioning in the early stages also helped to establish rapport between interviewer and interviewee.

During the research ideas and opinions which employees expressed in primarily formal but also in informal settings were listened to, and inductive reasoning was used to understand and interpret the employees' perspectives. A comparative analysis of different viewpoints helped to interpret structural and sociocultural phenomena, and an attempt was made to see connections and patterns between items of information obtained from different sources, and between details provided by individuals and the functioning of the organisation. Routine organisational phenomena such as 'clock-in' times and various operational strategies are interpreted differently by employees. The ethnographic investigation helped to reveal such differences, reasons for them, as well as gaps in the distribution of knowledge in the organisation, misrepresentations, and misunderstandings between employees. In this way the ethnographic investigation pointed out various dimensions of relationships between employees as well as tensions, fears, complaints, and resentment among them.

This study was approached in the knowledge that the strategy of participant observation would be important, but it soon became apparent that within the corporate environment observation was not going to produce a comprehensive volume of information. Nevertheless, communication styles, time allocations, daily routines, and spatial dimensions of organisational life, as well as aspects of employees' lives within the organisation were observed and noted (cf Hamada

1999:3), insofar that such details could be obtained and were relevant to the research. Information acquired in this way proved to be indispensable, and observation of the company's operations facilitated understanding of its business objectives; method of production; general functioning on a daily basis; which tasks were performed by whom, where and how; who associated with whom in the performance of particular tasks; regular interaction and communication patterns among employees, and the technology employed. In addition, observation of the spatial arrangement of the company gave impetus to and emphasised the accuracy and representativeness of data provided by research participants on the establishment and functioning of social groupings, interpersonal relationships, and the attitudes and perceptions of employees towards others within the company.

Early in the research a significant strategy of relating information emerged, namely the telling of 'stories', or third-person accounts of participants' realities, to illustrate or explain either someone's own experiences and what he/she saw or knew had happened to other people in the organisation (cf Schwartzman 1993:27). This happened spontaneously, either as part of an employee's response to a question or in response to a request for him/her to illustrate a particular matter. When employees were encouraged to talk about various issues, such as what they were currently doing in the company, their experiences of the company, or the nature of their specific responsibilities, they responded in narrative form by using stories to describe their ideas. For instance, an employee would make a remark in line with 'I remember an incident when ...' or 'I'll give you an example ...', followed by a story. Storytelling was therefore a means either of presenting original information or illustrating something.

The contents of the stories added a great deal to the richness of the research data and also served as a means of controlling or checking the validity of data obtained on other occasions. In a subsequent review of the significance of storytelling in ethnographic research (cf Schwartzman 1993), it was discovered that stories are in fact an important source of data for organisational ethnographers because they often provide natural answers to recurring questions that individuals in organisations ask themselves, while the narration of stories also reveals how employees experience their organisation and its members. After conducting interviews with persons from different positions in the company, patterns were discerned in the stories (cf Schwartzman 1993:62), and they could be interpreted in three ways: stories about events, stories about individuals, and stories that illustrated particular sociocultural values. They were also either anecdotal (relations of individual experiences and incidents) or constituted a description of an event which occurred in the past. They were therefore told and interpreted as representations of real events (cf Schwartzman 1993:43).

1.3 The anthropological perspective

Besides the ethnographic method of enquiry described above, an anthropological perspective in an investigation of organisational phenomena embraces principles unique to the discipline and gives it a character which differentiates it from similar studies undertaken by industrial psychologists, industrial sociologists, students of business management or human resource management, among others. Briefly, these principles include

- *Holism*, an approach which links various aspects of organisational phenomena into a perceived comprehensive entity, and the related principle of *integration*, according to which a single aspect of the organisation cannot be evaluated without cognisance being taken of related aspects.
- *Relativism*, the principle which emphasises the importance of evaluating cultural phenomena in terms of the culture itself and not on the basis of any other value system, and its converse, *ethnocentrism*, which, if disregarded and practised respectively, will impose the researcher's ideas and values on research data and thus produce biased interpretations of what is acquired and reported during the research.
- The *notion of culture* as a set of ideas manifest as patterned or standardised aspects of group behaviour, and which thus constitutes the general context for the research and the key concept or frame of reference for explaining behaviour. In this sense the notion of culture as applicable in this study is regarded as an analytical concept, as something which the organisation is, and not something which the organisation has (cf Wright 1995:83).
- The so-called *emic* (the 'insider's') *approach* to knowledge according to which a researcher investigates 'below the surface' of people's behaviour and looks at deeper meanings of their assumptions, motivations, experiences and feelings. While this makes people aware of their uniqueness, it also makes it possible to uncover the basic causes of tensions, fears, resentments and misunderstanding and to understand why different people ascribe different meanings to particular events (cf Hamada 1999:3).
- The *comparative cross-cultural analysis* and the resultant volume of ethnographic information at their disposal, allow anthropologists to generalise about the behaviour of people and their relationships with others. Similarities and differences in sociocultural phenomena between people can be investigated, thereby also facilitating an understanding

of why different interpretations and meanings are ascribed to phenomena by different people.

- Use of the concept *sociocultural* in this study means that it addresses both the 'social', ie the fulfilment of roles and positions and the resultant groups and relationships which are established, and the 'cultural', that is, standardised cognitive and material phenomena which influence relationships and behaviour (De Villiers 1993:9).
- Finally, *social networks* (the totality of relationships between people), an investigation of which makes it possible to discern how day-to-day activities, decisions, and group formation influence and are influenced by interaction between people.
- These principles and procedures are applied in this study and it is hoped that this application will contribute to the ultimate effectiveness and meaningfulness of this project.

1.4 The target company and research participants

The company constitutes one branch of a larger organisation which has its headquarters in Pretoria. The holding company, which is listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, consists of three primary interrelated divisions, focusing respectively on investment, the food industry, and manufacturing of particular products as an outflow of the food industry. The division of which the company forms part was established in the 1970s, and consists of four separate companies located in Gauteng, but formerly also in Limpopo Province. Its over-arching objective is to be a profitable, customer-oriented distributor, marketer and provider of quality products of a particular kind. In January 1999, the total number of employees in the division was 722. Other companies within the group are located in various parts of South Africa, including Durbanville and Wellington in the Western Cape; Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal; KingWilliam'sTown, Eastern Cape, and Klerksdorp, North West Province.

In economic and business terms the company can be classified as a small enterprise in view of the number of employees of fifty-two. The company is located on the outskirts of a large town close to Johannesburg, overlooking a black residential area. It moved to these premises about three years before the research was conducted from its former location in central Johannesburg. It is situated directly alongside a related company which constitutes its main supplier of marketable goods. The company offices and the *raadsaal*, where meetings are held, are located upstairs in a two-floor building which forms part of a larger structure incorporating a security area, loading zone, meeting hall and store-rooms downstairs. The surrounding grounds are large enough for manoeuvring heavy-duty trucks to the loading platforms, and also incorporate parking areas

for employees' vehicles. Entrance to the premises is manned by security guards and to the rear of the building are the vehicle maintenance workshops. A cafeteria is shared with the company next door, but there is no common room or lounging area for employees.

The twenty-seven research participants were selected from the total staff complement of fifty-two, which represent a large sample of 52%. The assistance of a white male employee was obtained to arrange the interviews since he was aware of the movements of the drivers and knew when they would be available to participate. To a large extent participation was voluntary although in certain cases participants were requested to participate because of their positions, for example the general manager, the black transport supervisor and the only black female clerk. Fourteen black employees and 13 white employees were interviewed, but this excludes the manager of the holding company in Pretoria. To ensure representativeness and a holistic perspective of diversity in the company, persons (black and white, male and female) from all categories of employees (Postgrades T0 to T6, T7 to T12 and T13 to T17; see summary below) were included in the project. An interview was also held with the managing director of the holding company in Pretoria.

Summary of distribution of research participants per postgrade

Postgrade T0 to T6	Administrative personnel: 4 females (3 white, 1 black)
Postgrade T7 to T12	Drivers: 12 black males Administrative personnel: 1 male (1 black, 2 white) Traders (loading controllers): 5 white males
Postgrade T13 to T17	Administrative personnel (managerial positions): 3 white males

The following information provides an overview of biographic details of the research participants:

Average age

Blacks	48 years
Whites	48 years

Gender distribution

	Male	Female
Black	13	1
White	10	3

Average number of years of service

Black	10.15
White	15.08

Language distribution

Afrikaans	English	North Sotho	Venda	Zulu	Tswana	Ndebele	South Sotho
12	1	4	3	1	3	1	2

Average number of persons supported on an employee's income

Blacks	8
Whites	2

All the (black) drivers were in possession of a heavy-duty vehicle driver's licence, ie Code 10 or Code 14 (or in terms of the new licensing codes: Codes C

or EC 1). None of the drivers was in possession of a Std 10 (Grade 12) certificate, with their schooling levels ranging from Grade 5 (Std 3) to Grade 11 (Std 9). Three of these drivers had completed Std 4 (Grade 6) or lower, which means that in strict terms they are functionally illiterate. The black male and female office employees had completed Std 10 and Std 9 respectively. One of the drivers with a Std 6 school-leaving certificate had completed a course in Economic and Defensive Driving. With the exception of a single employee with a Std 8 (Grade 10) school leaving certificate, the white participants were all in possession of a Std 10 certificate. Two of them had completed tertiary diplomas in business management; both were busy with further studies at the time of the interviews.

1.5 Some explanatory comments

At this preliminary stage several explanatory comments, all of which constitute significant contextual information for the study, and therefore also for evaluation and interpretation of research data, are in order.

Besides various inconsistencies in the information that was reported, other matters which may also be regarded as contextual became apparent while the research was in progress and seemed to have an impact upon organisational activities and thus also on the outcome of the research. At the time of the research there were daily media reports about labour unrest in various sectors of the economy: teachers and legal officials participated in strike actions and the ERPM mine on the East Rand announced its intention to retrench a large number of workers. There were also daily reports of the extent of unemployment in the country, a petrol price increase, devaluation of the South African currency, primarily in relation to the United States dollar, ongoing concern about the country's economy and its possible reaction to the retirement of the governor of the Reserve Bank and his replacement by a member of the governing party. Against the background of this instability and uncertainty, operations and activities at the company were observed to proceed smoothly, that is without any obvious indications of the above industrial strife or uncertainty. This observation eventually proved to be an important factor in research participants' perceptions of corporate activities, and it became necessary to look for reasons for the stability. Moreover, the managers were generally satisfied with employee productivity, absenteeism amongst employees was hardly known, staff turnover was extremely stable, and to all intents and purposes the company was on a sound financial footing. Circumstances at the company therefore appeared to be somewhat incongruous with what was occurring in many other parts of the country. Research participants provided varying ideas about this situation.

An interesting phenomenon involved the reactions of participants to the research process. At first all the employees were hesitant to participate, even though the manager had explained its purpose to them at a special meeting. They were unsure not only of the intentions of the research, but also of what was eventually to be done with the information they provided. It is therefore acknowledged that, particularly in the early stages of the research, participants may have been inclined to 'hold back' on information for fear of expressing ideas which could have negative implications for themselves, or out of a sense of loyalty to the company and its management. Towards the end of the research this situation changed dramatically, especially amongst the black employees, although by no means restricted to them. Employees began to view an interview as an opportunity to express their ideas freely without fear of repercussions and as a consultation session which they appeared to welcome as an occasion during which they could speak their minds about matters which bothered them, perhaps in the hope that something would be done about them. Some of these matters were personal, a discussion of which in certain cases triggered emotional responses from research participants (cf Carnavale & Kanu Kogod 1996:15), thereby emphasising how seriously they were considered. Towards the end of the research some black employees deliberately sought interviews, obviously in the hope that the interview session would help them find a solution to a matter that was troubling them. By then participants had clearly discussed the interviews and felt sufficiently confident to recommend to co-workers that they too should be interviewed.

While the intention of the study was to research the topic as thoroughly as possible and to report on it comprehensively, it is acknowledged that it has many shortcomings, that is, issues which emerged during the research and which during the writing of the report appeared to be superficial, inadequate or which produced questions which must remain unanswered. For this reason the study must be regarded as an exploratory investigation of aspects of sociocultural diversity. Some unanswered questions or unaddressed issues are mentioned in the final section of the report which may be regarded as topics for further research.

1.6 Presentation

This report consists of different sections in line with the dimensions of sociocultural diversity mentioned earlier: first, the current reality of the target company, ie features which describe its nature and create its operational context, is described. Second, the human dimension of company operations in terms of group formation and relationships among employees is described. Third, affec-

tive and cognitive matters associated with employees' positions and functioning are dealt with, as well as some implications of such matters for behaviour within the corporate environment. Fourth, conclusions to the study are presented with some reference to problems or 'cultural collisions' identified during the interviews, many of which constitute tensions which are not immediately apparent. Here the assumption is that the problems and tensions constitute barriers to effective interaction between employees resulting in a process of sociocultural alienation, and are inhibiting factors in promoting positive consequences of sociocultural diversity and the achievement of organisational objectives. The presence of problems does not imply that the company does not meet its objectives; it clearly does, but intergroup tension is latent and it would seem to be more widespread than people in the company either realise or are prepared to acknowledge. Thus conflicting issues are pointed out in the report and where possible their impact on behaviour is mentioned. It is easy to identify problems, but providing solutions to them is not. The latter, however, was not an objective of the research and searching for solutions for problems which have been identified will call for greater involvement in the target group and its operations. It should be borne in mind that problems which are reported do not apply equally to all the employees.

Throughout the report reference to 'the company' should be read as meaning the target company. Research participants are referred to in general terms to avoid identification, although specific individuals can be identified from the nature of the details provided. This is unintentional, but it was decided to include the details for clarity and to ensure that the report is as comprehensive as possible. To vary the presentation, when research participants are referred to, the concepts of informant or employee(s) are also used. In the latter case the usage does not imply generalisation to all the employees of the company, but only those who participated in the research.