
Conclusion

5.1 General

To achieve the objectives of this study (1.1 above), an attempt was made to gain insight into the behaviour of and interaction between persons with different sociocultural backgrounds, all of whom are employees of a profit-seeking organisation. The context of the research comprised the different dimensions of sociocultural diversity, with particular regard for the so-called tertiary dimensions, that is, employees' roles and relationships within the organisation and cognitive and affective phenomena, such as perceptions, attitudes and motivation, as influenced by aspects of the primary and secondary dimensions. Cognitive and affective phenomena influence employees' behaviour, decision-making patterns and emotional reactions to organisational phenomena. Consequently, this study did more than describe the existent reality of the organisation, and was also an attempt to explain the meaning of various aspects of organisational phenomena linked to sociocultural diversity, including those not readily observable, in terms of the views expressed by the research participants. Against the background of a dynamic organisational context, employees' ideas, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour were accordingly seen to vary in line with a range of factors.

In the South African context the notion of diversity is generally reduced to the presence and involvement of people of different racial groups within a particular setting. Increased heterogeneity has become a reality in all types of organisation. While racial and concomitant sociocultural differences are the key factors in this study, it is not intended merely to be a generalised description of such differences and their implications for company operations. Instead the differences are regarded as causative in ways in which employees behave, and are factors in employees' experiences, understanding, interpretation and explanation of various workplace phenomena. In addition to this, the individual should not be excluded since personality traits and individual dispositions also play a

role in these processes. The viewpoint of each research participant is therefore likely to be incomplete and consists of a mixture of insight and understanding, as well as inadequate information, and in some cases even prejudice or the disinclination to put oneself in another's shoes. The research data therefore represent an attempt to understand the dynamic complex corporate environment and the people who function within it (cf Rosaldo 1993:128).

In spite of this, a few general comments about black/white perceptions, ideas and behaviour are in order, either as similarities or as differences in their views. During the interviews various ideas and attitudes could be associated with black employees as opposed to white, which then proved to be important contextual information for the evaluation and interpretation of research data.

- First, when some white participants referred to the company in terms of members, it was apparent that they were referring to white employees only, that is, to the exclusion of black employees. Similarly, in spite of comments to the contrary, black employees also very largely identified the company as a white institution. From this can be deduced that in the minds of employees, although not explicitly, the company consists of whites and constitutes a white institution.
- Second, the different meanings ascribed to events, decisions and actions within the company by black and white employees, appear to constitute a significant source of misunderstanding among them, giving rise to frustration, resentment, self-justification and unfounded judgmental attitudes. In most cases the racial component of such issues could be linked to the group establishment based on task differentiation which translated into white supervisors and black drivers.
- Third, in the categories of employees a lack of clear understanding of various key issues was apparent: for instance, not all the white employees were cognisant of the meaning, and thus the implications, of 'affirmative action', while many of the black employees did not understand the meaning and implications of 'change'. It was disconcerting to discover that in all categories of employees certain individuals lacked cognisance of matters that impact directly upon their work and their lives in general.
- Fourth, particularly significant throughout was the strong identification among all categories of employees with the objectives of the company as a profitseeking, service-oriented organisation, and the repeated indications, directly and indirectly, of their loyalty to the company, although in many cases this did not extend to other employees, specifically the manager. One can assume that in the minds of many employees, black and white, the company has a separate existence and identity from the people who work

there, which helps to explain the positive attitude towards the work process and the company in general among the majority of the research participants.

- Fifth, in most cases members of different groups appeared to know little about each other's frames of reference, and what they did know was often superficial, constituted generalisations, or was based on inadequate knowledge. In line with this were negative attitudes and perceptions towards one another, coupled with unsubstantiated evaluations from both groups. It was also apparent that among the drivers, younger people were more outspoken in their criticism of the company and other employees than the older drivers, a situation confirmed by white employees in their comments about and attitudes they expressed towards the drivers.
- Finally, as regards the meaning of work, the drivers essentially consider work a means of earning a living, while to the white employees, in addition work obtains a more comprehensive meaning of constituting a means of contributing to the functioning of the company in accordance with a strict time-orientation.

Early observation revealed the existence of separate functioning groups, the development of which could be relayed to the physical layout of the company and its business and operational functions, but which eventually acquired an identity and functional existence of their own, based on other criteria, not least of which were task orientation and the ideas and behaviour of the members of the groups concerned. This observation of group formation on the basis of spatial location was later substantiated during the interviews, and, as was shown, gave rise to the categorisation of employees into office personnel, traders (loading controllers) and drivers as the dominant social groupings among the employees.

There was a marked tendency for research participants to reveal that they, for instance, do not behave in a particular way, such as discriminate against other employees or hold racist or judgmental attitudes towards others, but that they know of others who do. Yet as the research proceeded, it became apparent from information provided by other research participants that such comments represent a form of 'wishful thinking'. This is not necessarily a strange phenomenon since people are often inclined to situationalise their behaviour, or attempt to portray themselves in as favourable a light as possible. One may surmise that such people do not purposely hold such attitudes, or at least they try to suppress them, but the attitudes do exist, and are ultimately revealed in perceptions and behaviour towards others.

Although it was not the intention of the research to focus on conflicts and problems that employees experience in the work context, it was inevitable that problems, or what people perceive as problems, featured prominently in the interviews, not least because it would appear that many research participants regarded the interviews as an opportunity to express what was troubling them. Problems emerging within the work environment, that can be traced to the inherent diversity in the company, were referred to as cultural collisions in the introduction to this study. Cultural collisions develop mainly as a consequence of unexpressed and unsatisfied expectations among people whose sociocultural orientations differ (Kanu Kogod 1991:45). They shape people's perceptions of workplace phenomena, their experiences and attitudes, as well as their relationships with other employees. As a result, a great deal of the research data, particularly in section 2, includes references to conflicts or problems which employees experience, including problems associated with the drivers' incentive bonuses, communication problems, strained interpersonal relationships, frustration and resentment.

5.2 The approach followed in the study

In practical terms, the anthropological research methods of in-depth interviewing based on semi-structured interview schedules, informal conversations and observation of work-related activities were applied during the research to elicit the thoughts and ideas relating to employee behaviour. Employees in all postgrades were involved in the project to ensure input across the entire spectrum of employees of the company. The approach that was followed had the following merits:

- It generated a mass of information about ways in which employees operationalise aspects of the functioning of the company and provided their first-hand views on how company matters are performed, their effects on employees, and the meanings that employees ascribe to them, amongst other matters.
- The examination of employees' lived experiences in the organisation also contributed to revealing what could be regarded as their hidden views, feelings, attitudes and perspectives, that is, aspects of their functioning within the company which cannot be observed directly, as well as some implications for workplace behaviour and their relationships with co-workers. In this manner, ways in which employees understand work-related phenomena, their personal problems in the work context and work-related experiences, and how these influence motivation and behaviour amongst other matters, were ascertained. From this becomes apparent that the type

of research methodology applied during the study stimulated and brought to the surface differences between employees which were either unknown to or unacknowledged by them, or which for various reasons they suppress. These differences were subsequently interpreted as belonging to the so-called tertiary dimensions of sociocultural diversity. This suggests that the methods applied were ideally suited for meeting the objectives of the study and made it possible to investigate the driving forces which impact on corporate beliefs and actions beyond the identification of mere patterns of behaviour.

- As a holistic enquiry based on the principle of integration of various aspects of the functioning of the organisation, the research made it possible to ascertain links and configurations of association between company-based phenomena, ie between the company and its employees, between company policy and employee behaviour, and between employee roles and relationships, amongst other matters. Thus, links were evident in different forms of analyses. For example, the investigation of work-related perceptions revealed a close connection with employees' attitudes towards various work-related phenomena, while evaluation of segments of company policy showed a significant connection with employee motivation. Consequently, the holistic approach meant that the company could be viewed as a complex and multidimensional organisation (cf Giovannini & Rosansky 1990:24) and helped to avoid excessive simplistic and reductionistic interpretation of research data (cf Werner & Schoepfle 1987:312).
- By borrowing ideas and concepts from other fields of study such as industrial psychology, organisational behaviour and human resource management in the interpretation of the research data, an attempt was made to broaden the relevance of the study and give it multidisciplinary significance. Inductive reasoning allowed an analysis of research data from the perspective of specific theoretical viewpoints in order to explain the general in terms of the specific. In this way deeper structural and sociocultural meanings of research data were sought, which, among other matters, helped to explain why company matters are interpreted differently by different members of the organisation.
- The emic approach applied during the study also helped to reveal something about the existing level of knowledge in the company and the covert dimensions of organisational phenomena, including misunderstandings between employees, resentments, aspirations, and varying interpretations of decisions and actions. It also revealed phenomena which proved to be unknown to various other employees, or pointed to the lack of awareness

of employees in all categories of the beliefs and behaviour of people whose sociocultural frames of reference differ from their own. At times research participants did not, or appeared to be unable to give reasons for or to explain their views. This may be a consequence of a desire not to provide unacceptable answers, a desire to please, or uncertainty about what would happen with the information they provided, or it may be indicative of discretion among the research participants and a sense of loyalty to the company and co-workers.

- Ethnocentrism on the part of the researcher is an ever-present possibility in a study of this nature. As a means of control, company management and other interested people associated with the company were requested to comment on the descriptions and explanations in the text.
- Because of the localisation of the research within a single organisation, the research data can be considered as situated information. It should also be stated that it is not unknown for responses to questioning during research to be inconsistent with actual behaviour or to be manipulated if research participants believe they are being studied. This implies that employees who participated in the project may have included details which they regarded as relevant, or which they thought were what the researcher wanted to hear, that is, as a response to a particular interview question asked in a specific setting. Consequently, the information acquired during the interviews should be regarded as 'situational' and is relevant at a particular moment in time and within a particular context. This also means that the research data can only be regarded as relevant to the target company and are not generalisable to similar organisational settings. At most, broad principles relevant to the study can be applied in other work environments.

5.3 Sociocultural alienation

The problems experienced by employees do not imply that the company does not meet its objectives. There is no doubt that it does, and that in relation to other companies, specifically its competitors in the market, it appears to be operating very effectively, a perception repeatedly confirmed by people in management positions. However, research data reveal that intergroup tensions appear to be latent and are possibly more pervasive than is generally recognised. In this final section various issues referred to in the discussion are identified as tensions that constitute barriers to effective interaction between employees. A word of caution is in order: the reference to barriers to interaction does not imply a lack of interaction. What are relevant here are constraints on effective interaction,

the presence of which appears to dampen employee morale, prohibit the establishment of meaningful ongoing relationships, shape employees' perceptions of and attitudes towards others, and may ultimately impact negatively on productivity.

The numerous inconsistencies in the views of the research participants are typical of the research data. Diverse and important organisational matters were given different meanings by different research participants, depending upon their positions, frames of reference, experience, their interpretation of relevant phenomena and of questions posed during the interviews. Inconsistencies and misunderstandings were displayed in various, at times opposite, ideas and beliefs, or explanations for particular organisational issues, for example the different perspectives on and explanations provided for the recording of the drivers' overtime work; the varying views on the way in which the company deals with the matter of shortages on orders, and the issues emerging from the company's use of contract pilots. By implication the organisation is filled with cultural collisions, internal contradictions and misunderstanding (cf Hamada 1994:26-27), although as mentioned by Werner and Schoepfle (1987:312), the most elaborate accounts of any organisation include not only consensus, but also contradiction. This situation is therefore not unusual in organisational settings (Giovannini & Rosansky 1990:37; Hamada 1994:60). Like cultural collisions, the presence of the inconsistencies must be linked to the involvement of socioculturally diverse people within the work environment, and to the apparent lack of understanding among all categories of employees of the frames of reference of their co-workers, which raises the questions of the extent to which the differences impact on the work process, and ultimately, on the achievement of organisational objectives. At this stage there are no ready answers to these questions, but the foregoing does help to explain, for instance, the different interpretations among the employees of the incentive system introduced for the drivers; the idea among black employees that they are paid lower wages merely because they are black; the different interpretations and understanding of the clock-in/clock-out system; conflicting perceptions of the manager, and varying interpretations and understanding of compensatory strategies associated with shortages on orders.

The question arises of the influence of such inconsistencies and contradictions for interaction between the employees of the company. What appears to be relevant is a process of sociocultural alienation among employees. It has been stated that sociocultural alienation has developed into a prominent issue in work environments characterised by cultural diversity (Hamada 1999:3). The process of alienation describes the experiences of separation or distancing among employees who operate in a work environment characterised by diversity, but without the implication of physical separation or a lack of contact and interac-

tion. Associated with the alienation and symptomatic of its presence are employees' affective experiences of resentment, negative perceptions and suppressed anger, among others, which the research showed exist as aspects of the tertiary dimensions of the sociocultural diversity which characterises the company. Without having a choice, people frequently find themselves working very closely together in situations involving persons whose sociocultural frames of reference differ from their own, and where their personal beliefs and values do not correspond with those of their employers. This produces a sense of 'not belonging' and of not being integrated into the mainstream activities of the organization, that is, a sense of alienation. In the company alienation is evident from several factors including the fact that the traders and drivers clearly regard themselves as separate categories of employees, which is illustrated by the negative perceptions and attitudes they have of various people, for example that the traders have of the office personnel, and the drivers of the office personnel and the traders. It is also evident in the considerable power distance and concomitant authority relationships between the managers and the drivers, indicated by the reluctance shown by some of the drivers to consult the manager; the lack of enthusiastic support for the social function among the traders; the general lack of understanding of various work-related issues among the drivers in spite of the precautions taken to ensure their understanding of, for example various aspects of membership of the provident fund and the functioning of the incentive bonus system; the frequent statement among the drivers that apartheid is still present in the company; complaints by certain employees that they are excluded from decision-making processes; the perception, justified or not, among black employees that they are not paid adequately, the resentment that drivers feel about the ways in which the company deals with the problem of shortages on orders and the deductions made from their incentive bonuses; the lack of contact, other than incidental work-related meetings, between the drivers and the majority of the office personnel, and the need for the drivers to work under constraints with tight deadlines in the delivery process. Alienated employees feel, for instance, that their contributions have limited significance for the company, and they are inadequately recognised, or that they are being discriminated against. This produces a sense of powerlessness and disconnectedness among some of the drivers, which is emphasised by their insistence that they 'just work', since no alternative forms of employment are available, and from the self-estrangement among them, that is, the perception of working for external rewards only (Bergh 1999:414). Work therefore becomes an end in itself.

Mitigating factors against the negative implications of alienation include loyalty and commitment to the organisation among all categories of employees, general awareness among employees that jobs are scarce in the current eco-

conomic climate of the country and must therefore be looked after, and the meaning of work to the majority of employees as a means of earning financial rewards to ensure their subsistence. In addition, agreement between various employees about how and why certain tasks must be performed counteracts the effects of the alienation, as does the fact that in many instances work is performed under circumstances of power and authority differences between employees. This means that regardless of the alienation and its implications, employees have no choice but to interact closely and effectively with persons who are the source of their alienation. As a result the alienation is suppressed. The work experience as well as the outcomes of the work process performed under such circumstances may not be entirely satisfactory, however.

It is unlikely that employees are aware of the alienation, and this study contends that its presence is revealed specifically as a result of the analysis of the so-called tertiary dimensions of diversity. According to Kanungo (1982:19), employees who work under supervision to ensure their and their families' financial security are by definition alienated whether they realise it or not. He states: 'They are alienated, because their labour is not free and autonomous and, hence, does not result in establishing their individuality.' It would seem therefore that the sociocultural alienation revealed in this study is an important issue impacting on various employees' morale and ultimately their productivity even though it is not readily observable from their daily activities.

On completion of this project it should be mentioned that the study ultimately acquired a depth and scope beyond what was originally anticipated. As a result, it was impossible to deal with and report on each aspect of the research in detail and, as was pointed out in the introduction, the study must be regarded as exploratory. This means that various topics in the report may have been addressed superficially, which has the further implication of identifying themes for future in-depth research, for example communication across group and sociocultural boundaries; the influence of attitudes on behaviour; ways in which unfavourable attitudes can be changed; effects of job satisfaction on employee performance (in terms of increasing productivity); mutual influencing between the company and the external environment; the existence of a corporate culture and its impact on employees' behaviour; the need for a company-specific induction and training program, and finally the need for a programme on understanding, developing sensitivity towards and managing sociocultural diversity in the company.

References

- Applebaum, H 1984a. 'Theoretical Introduction: Work in Market and Industrial Society' in Applebaum, H (ed). *Work in Market and Industrial Societies*. Albany: SUNY.
- Applebaum, H 1984b. 'Theoretical Introduction' in Applebaum, H (ed). *Work in Nonmarket and Transitional Societies*. Albany: SUNY.
- Bergh, Z C 1999. 'The Humanistic-phenomenological Perspectives' in Bergh, Z C & Theron, A L (eds). *Psychology in the Work Context*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Brief, A P & Nord, W R 1990. *Meanings of Occupational Work: A Collection of Essays* Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Britan, G M & Cohen, R 1980. 'Towards an Anthropology of Formal Organisations' in Britan, G M & Cohen, R (eds). *Hierarchy and Society: Anthropological Perspectives on Bureaucracy*. Philadelphia: ISHI.
- Carnavale, A P & Kanu Kogod, S 1996. *Tools and Activities for a Diverse Work Force*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Carrell, M R, Elbert, N F, Hatfield, R D, Grobler, P A, Marx, M & Van der Schyf, S 1999. *Human Resource Management in South Africa*. Pearson Education South Africa.
- Cilliers, F 1999. 'Group Behaviour' in Bergh, ZC & Theron AC (eds). *Psychology in the Work Context*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- De Villiers, S 1993. An Anthropological Investigation of Some Xhosa-speaking Patients' Perceptions and Behaviour in a Hospital Context. Unpublished DLitt et Phil thesis: University of South Africa.
- Gamst, F C 1981. 'Considerations of an Anthropology of Work'. *Anthropology of Work Newsletter*, 2(1):2-7.
- Giovannini, M J & Rosansky, M H 1990. *Anthropology and Management Consulting: Forging a New Alliance*. NAPA Bulletin No 9. American Anthropological Association.
- Goleman, D 1998. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hamada, T 1994. 'Introduction' in Hamada, T & Sibley, W E (eds). *Anthropological Perspectives on Organisational Culture*. Lanham: University of America Press.
- Hamada, T 1999. 'Practicing Anthropology in Business Organisations'. *Practicing Anthropology*, 21(4):2-4.
- Harris, P R & Moran, R T 1996. *Managing Cultural Differences: Leadership Strategies for a New*

- World of Business*. 4th ed. Houston: Gulf Publishing Company.
- Hoecklin, L A 1993. *Managing Cultural Differences for Competitive Advantage*. London: The Economist Intelligence Unit.
- Human, L 1996. 'Competencies for Managing Diversity: What South African Managers Need' in Steyn, M E & Motshabi, K B (eds). *Cultural Synergy in South Africa*. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Jordan, A T 1999. 'An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Organisational Change: The Move to Self-managed Work Teams'. *Practicing Anthropology*. 21(4):14–19.
- Kanu-Kogod, S 1991. *A Workshop for Managing Diversity in the Workplace*. San Diego: Pfeiffer.
- Kanungo, R N 1982. *Work Alienation: An Integrative Approach*. New York: Praeger.
- Kavanagh, K H & Kennedy, P H 1992. *Promoting Cultural Diversity: Strategies for Health Care Professionals*. Newbury Park: SAGE.
- Koopman, A 1991. *Transcultural Management: How to unlock Global Resources*. Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell.
- Marcus, G & Fischer, M J J 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, R 1998. *International Management*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Robbins, S P 1998. *Organisational Behavior*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall.
- Robinson, D 1973. *Patients, Practitioners, & Medical Care: Aspects of Medical Sociology*. London: Heinemann Medical Books.
- Rosaldo, R 1993. *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Salaman, G 1997. 'Culturing Production' in Du Guy, P (ed). *Production of Culture Cultures of Production*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Schwartzman, H B 1993. *Ethnography*. Organisations Qualitative Research Methods Series 27. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Senge, P; Kleiner, A; Roberts, C; Ross, R; Roth, G & Smith, B 1999. *The Dance of Change: The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organisations*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Seymour-Smith, C 1986. *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*. London: Macmillan.
- Singer, M 1987. *Intercultural Communication: A Perceptual Approach*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Smit, P J & Cronjé, G J De J 1997. *Management Principles: A Contemporary Edition for Africa*. Kenwyn: Juta.
- Theron, A 1999. 'Attitudes and Values' in Bergh, Z C & Theron, A L (eds). *Psychology in the Work Context*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Thomas, R R 1991. *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity*. New York: Amacom.
- Wallman, S 1979. 'Introduction: The Scope for Ethnicity' in Wallman, S (ed). *Ethnicity at Work*. London: Macmillan.
- Werner, O & Schoepfle, G M 1987. *Ethnographic Analysis and Data Management* (volume 2). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Wright, S 1995. 'Anthropology: Still the Uncomfortable Discipline?' in Ahmed, A &

Shore, C (eds). *The Future of Anthropology: Its Relevance to the Contemporary World*.
London: Athlone.

Dynamics of Diversity makes a valuable contribution to the relatively new field of Business Anthropology, or the Anthropology of Organisations, and is one of the first of its kind set in the South African corporate environment.

It investigates various dimensions of sociocultural diversity and consequences for the establishment of workplace groups, relationships between various categories of employees and for workplace behaviour. Its main contribution lies in the insight it provides into the nature of employee relationships, behaviour, perceptions and attitudes as they are shaped by the sociocultural frames of reference of different employees, with due regard for position and job descriptions. Broad principles emerging from the study can be applied in other South African work environments characterised by sociocultural diversity.

It is of interest to all students, academics and practitioners who are exposed to qualitative methodology in the behavioural sciences and who are confronted with issues of diversity in South African organisations. Besides anthropologists, these would include human resource practitioners, industrial psychologists, industrial sociologists and students of business management.

1-86888-277-2

