Towards the measurement of 
organisational culture

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with methodological issues in understanding organisational culture. Its main aim was to investigate what would be required to develop a measure for organisational culture that would be practically useful, while at the same time capable of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon. The research was carried out in two divisions of a large automotive manufacturing firm in South Australia. Data were collected over a period of three years during which time the researcher maintained a consistently high level of involvement with the research setting and subjects. Following is a brief summary of this research in terms of its review of the relevant literature and the three studies that were conducted.

The literature review began with an exploration of the concept of organisational culture. Attention was drawn to the confusion between the ‘essence’ of organisational culture and its surface level manifestations. The question of organisational culture versus organisational subcultures was addressed and a brief review was provided of attempts to classify organisational cultures and their elements. This was followed by a discussion of the linkages between organisational culture and the related concepts of organisational climate and social representations. The second part of the literature review explored the origins of the contemporary study of organisational culture and its popularisation, particularly as a practical means for understanding and improving organisational performance. The third and final part of the literature review considered the extant approaches to the study of organisational culture. In particular, it was argued that, while qualitative methods are better suited to tapping the deeper levels, or ‘essence’, of culture than quantitative methods, they are very time consuming to use properly and hence are limited in terms of what they can practically provide. It was also argued that quantitative methods, while they provide more systematic and economical means for assessing and comparing organisational cultures, seriously over-simplify the concept and, at best, provide insights into the surface aspects of culture only. Accordingly, it was proposed that some combination of these methods might offer a practically useful means of assessing organisational culture which could push beyond the surface level manifestations of the phenomenon to provide insights into its deeper level aspects.
The first study was entirely qualitative and was designed to assist in the validation of subsequent studies involving both quantitative and qualitative methods. A major part of the first study involved in-depth and largely unstructured interviews of approximately one and a half hours duration with each of twenty respondents from the firm's coaling division. These data were supplemented with data from observations of work behaviours and practices, as well as from informal conversations between the researcher and divisional members at all levels of the hierarchy. 'Diary' data of this latter kind were gathered (from both of the participating divisions) over the entire course of the research project and were used to validate aspects of the method through all stages of its development. On the basis of a thematic content analysis of both interview and 'diary' data, some thirty common themes were identified which reflected divisional member experience in relation to a range of issues. These issues included critical events in the history of the division, communication and decision-making practices, the division's operating reward system (including promotional criteria) and its system of performance appraisal. Within each of these areas, it was possible to make some tentative hypotheses about underlying beliefs and assumptions that might constitute part of the division's culture with respect to the above issues. It was found that these beliefs and assumptions could most usefully be classified using the typology proposed by Schein (1985). In particular, there was good evidence provided for beliefs and assumptions in Schein's Category 2 - 'The Nature of Human Nature' - which, at an organisational level, is concerned with the way in which workers and managers are viewed. McGregor's (1960) distinction between Theory X and Theory Y assumptions about the nature of workers also appeared to be particularly relevant in so far as this division seemed to be predominantly Theory X in its orientation. Finally, Study I provided good support for the view that context, in particular the historical context, plays an important role in shaping the current, and even anticipated future, experience of organisation members.

Insights obtained from Study I informed the development of questions for a semi-structured interview that was piloted in Study II. On the basis of the type of information that the subject group seemed most able to provide, the interview was designed to investigate respondents' beliefs and assumptions about the 'role of workers' and the 'role of supervisors'. The interview combined open-ended and closed questions, thereby enabling both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected. Open-ended questions were used to further explore the role of context in understanding organisational culture. Specifically, respondents were asked about their perception of
the respective roles of the workers and supervisors in their division (i) at the present time, (ii) in the past, and (iii) in the anticipated future. They were also asked about their knowledge of the roles played by workers and supervisors in other organisations. Finally, in an attempt to gain insights into respondents' beliefs about what the role of workers ideally should be, they were asked to describe the 'best' and 'worst' worker with whom they had ever worked in their division. Closed questions took the form of forced-choice rating questions that required respondents to rate particular aspects of the role of workers and the role of supervisors which had emerged as being important in Study 1. With respect to the former, respondents were required to (i) rate the role of workers in their division at the present time on a scale from 'very active' (Theory Y) to 'very passive' (Theory X); (ii) rate their degree of satisfaction with the current role of workers; and (iii) rate the effectiveness of workers in this role. With respect to the latter, respondents were required to (i) rate the role of supervisors in their division at the present time on a scale from 'very consumptive' (Theory Y) to 'very directive' (Theory X); (ii) rate their degree of satisfaction with the current role of supervisors; and (iii) rate the effectiveness of supervisors in this role.

At this stage, subjects were available from two divisions of the company, the tooling division and a production division involved in the manufacture of plastics components. This provided a means whereby, in addition to exploring questions of methodology, the possible existence of organisational subcultures might also be investigated. Individual interviews of approximately one and a half hours each were conducted with six subjects from each of the participating divisions. The findings from Study II served to highlight a number of strengths and weaknesses of the method. It was found, for example, that responses to the rating questions (in particular, the question asking respondents to rate the role of workers as more or less active or passive, and the role of supervisors as more or less consumptive or directive) varied considerably and that this variability seemed to be a result of differences in respondents' interpretations of the questions and associated response categories. It was also found that much of this interpretive inconsistency could be understood when contextual data (in the form of respondents' accounts of the role of workers and the role of supervisors in the past, the anticipated future and in other organisations) were taken into account.

In Study III, a revised version of the interview schedule used in Study II was administered to thirty one respondents, twelve from the tooling division and nineteen from the production division. Interviews lasted for approximately two hours each. In
the revised protocol, the focus of questioning was narrower in that information was sought about respondents' views regarding the 'role of workers' only. In this case, however, the role of workers was investigated in terms of two separate sub-topics. The first of these was concerned with what workers do (that is, their duties and activities), and the second was concerned with the defining characteristics of 'good' workers. While the previous approach of combining open-ended with closed questions was retained in the revised protocol, the closed questions took the form of a series of prompts about particular activities which could potentially be used to describe the role of workers. These questions were designed to stimulate a more in-depth analysis of the role of workers than had been achieved using the previous rating scales. Another key feature of the revised protocol was that it sought more specific information about context. Not only were respondents asked about their 'experience' of the role of workers in the present context, the past context (both in their current and in other organisations), the anticipated future context, and the 'ideal' context, but they were also asked to comment on the timing, and perceived cause(s), of any changes from one context to another which they reported. Finally, there was an explicit focus in the revised protocol on the use of qualitative data (in the form of respondents' elaborations on and clarifications of, their responses) to give meaning to quantitative data (in the form of responses to closed and forced choice questions).

The overall findings of Study III suggested that the method developed offered a potentially useful basis for assessing deeper-level aspects of organisational culture, which would be more economical to use than traditional qualitative methods. In particular, it was concluded that, in order to infer a group's cultural beliefs and assumptions, it is essential to have information about the context of the group's experience. It was found, for example, that information of this kind revealed important differences between the two divisions that were not apparent from the analysis of present-time data only. The analysis of attributal data, in the form of respondents' explanations for changes from one context to another, also served to highlight important differences between the divisions that would not otherwise have been apparent. A second important conclusion suggested by the findings of Study III was that, in order to understand the complexity of organisational culture, any attempt to measure it should include a facility for tapping the 'meaning', or interpretive dimension, of organisation members' experience. In this sense, it was argued that an integrated approach such as
that developed (in which qualitative data are used to give meaning to quantitative data) is likely to be superior to approaches which rely solely on quantitative methods.