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# The influence of language and culture on a South African corporate

ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether the different home languages of the employees in a South African corporate have an influence on their perception of the organisational structure and processes. The study was conducted in the context of the ABSA financial institution in the Western Cape.

The authors conducted a series of interviews with management-level employees who speak Afrikaans, English and Xhosa as home languages, in an attempt to ascertain the extent of the influence of individual cultures on perceptions and actions in corporate society. Specific attention was given to how these individuals perceived meetings, decision-making processes and conflict.

These interviews were transcribed verbatim and studied by means of narrative analysis using a specialised software package to provide better insight into the roles that language and culture play in a South African organisation. Based on the narratives provided by the respondents in this study, the authors concluded that individual culture plays a significant role in the perceptions of organisational structures such as conflict management, interaction during meetings, decision-making and the acceptance of authority.

South Africa is now celebrating more than ten years of democracy following the country's first democratic election in 1994. In the past decade, corporate South Africa has seen an unprecedented cultural diversity in its workforce. The dynamics of local organisations have changed to incorporate the various cultural representations. In an attempt to explore the multicultural phenomenon that exists in the workplace, the authors conducted a study among the supervisory and managerial staff of a prominent South African financial

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institution, ABSA, in the hope of providing better insight into the roles language and culture play in a South African organisation. Such an understanding could not only establish a more effective organisational culture, but also ultimately help South African business to deal with cultural diversity and conflict in the workplace in a more creative way. This article describes a qualitative research project utilising narrative analysis to investigate how employees' home language influences their perception of corporate culture.

## 1.  INTRODUCTION

Du Gay (1997: 259) maintains that organisational culture directly influences the performance of an organisation.  This influence is evident not only in the effectiveness of the organisation, but also in the unity, motivation and consensus among employees. Social scientists (Havilland, 1993; Lustig & Koestner, 1993: 298 and Randlesome, 2002: 65) have argued that language and communication are key elements of culture, and act as driving principles behind the formation of an effective organisational culture.  Although cultural theorists view different elements as a key to the understanding of culture, the authors support Hansen and Kahnweiler (1993: 1391) who argue that the language of an organisation's employees is the key to understanding its organisational culture.  The authors are of the opinion that language forms an integral part of the South African organisational structure, decision-making processes and behaviour, contributing to the creation of an organisational culture.  Language also impacts on how these elements are understood by different cultural groups in an organisation.

An understanding of the important role that language plays in organisational culture could provide organisations and their management with a better understanding of how different cultural groups in their organisations perceive and influence the organisation's culture. Randlesome (2002: 70-71) argues that culture and language impact negatively on the daily routines in the workplace and can seriously affect the productivity of such a company.

For the purposes of this study, the authors concentrated on the three predominant languages of the Western Cape, namely Afrikaans, English and Xhosa to study the effect of home language on organisational culture with specific emphasis on conflict, decision-making and meetings.   Although conflict was not necessarily viewed as a negative influence in an organisation, it was argued that Afrikaans, English and Xhosa each brings its own cultural heritage in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes, rituals and behaviour into an organisation.

## 2.  DIVERSITY AND CONFLICT

It must be accepted that cultural diversity as reflected by language can create different levels of meaning and cause conflict in organisations.  When conflict due to language differences and cultural diversity is examined against both the historical and current social and political backdrop of South African society, it is seen as a very sensitive issue.  Unfortunately, this conflict is often attributed to ethnocentricity, stereotyping or racism

without taking cultural backgrounds into account.  The authors assert that a better understanding of cultural differences as expressed through language can lead to conflict being used as a positive influence in South African organisations.

Hamada (1995: 162-185) proposes that conflict can occur in any situation where interaction between different cultures takes place.  It is, however, a misconception to assume that all conflicts have a detrimental effect in an organisation.  Organisational behaviour scientists (Eisenhardt, Kahwajy & Bougeois, 1997: 77-85; Pascale, 1994: 20-26) are of the opinion that internal conflict can be advantageous to organisations when it is used to sharpen competitive instincts.  Evans (1992: 49-51) supports this opinion and views conflict as a natural, inevitable way of life, which could prove valuable to an organisation if handled correctly.  She advocates a new approach to conflict resolution, which should take culture, gender, communication style and non-verbal behaviour into account.  Capozzoli (1995: 3-5) suggests that group membership does not preclude conflict and offers the following as potential causes of conflict:  diverse cultural values, attitudes, needs, expectations, perceptions, resources and personalities.

This argument can be viewed as particularly valid in the South African, and specifically the Western Cape, organisational environment where members of different cultures interact on a daily basis.

## 3.   CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN CORPORATE SOUTH AFRICA

With the emergence of the Xhosa culture in Western Cape organisations, it becomes important to look at what the culture brings to the organisational environment. Ubuntu can be viewed as a critical and encompassing aspect of the Xhosa culture.  Researchers such as Mbigi (1997:12) advocate that such inherent cultural concepts can play a major role in how organisations function in the new South Africa and that the acceptance of such principles could lead to higher performance levels for organisations.  While acknowledging the contribution of Western and Eastern values to South African organisational cultures, Mbigi (1997) advocates the incorporation of Xhosa cultural heritage such as their strong oral history and features such as rituals, forums and consensus decision-making into the South African organisational culture.

The authors concede that the South African organisational culture has historically been shaped by Western business practices such as rigid hierarchical structures, strong emphasis on individual performance and the development of an organisational culture.  However, it is important to accept that South Africa faces a specific challenge in the cultural heterogeneous labour force.  An exploration of traditional South African organisational structures revealed a dominance of white males in managerial positions, especially prior to 1994.  Similarities can also be found in the strong hierarchical structure of South African organisations and the emphasis on individual achievement, which can be attributed to the strong individualistic trends of both Afrikaans and English cultures.

Christie, Lessem & Mbigi (1993:17-19) argue that the South African organisational culture has long been a manifestation of Western influences, while ignoring Afrocentric

management approaches. Khoza supports this and maintains that South African organisations have imposed an organisational culture based on European and American concepts, instead of including African traditions and cultures that focus on a community concept of management (Christie et al, 1993: 117, 122).

The question that must now be asked is whether South African organisations have investigated different approaches from the traditional Western/Eurocentric management perspectives approach to offer the required cultural flexibility to South Africa's diverse organisational society.

## 4.  RELATED RESEARCH

Although intercultural communication has been the subject of many internal organisational studies, there has been a lack of formal South African research on the effects of language on organisational culture.  Research has concentrated predominantly on organisational structures, management styles, processes in the organisational environment and the analysis of specific organisations.  However, the specific role that language has played in the creation of organisational culture and how it influences conflict within the organisational culture has thus far been neglected theoretically.  To the authors' knowledge, there has been no specific research in the Western Cape based on the role that language plays in the multicultural organisation.

The available literature on organisational culture and strategic management procedures is mainly based on Western, and specifically American, research.  An analysis by Norburn and Adler (1990:452) revealed that 80% of 11 000 manuscripts on international management published in 24 management journals in a ten-year period were based on studies conducted in American organisations and written by American authors.

## 5.  TWO DECADES OF CORPORATE CULTURE

The dynamic nature of organisational culture necessitates an overview of how the study of organisational culture has developed in the past two decades.  As the study of organisational culture is constantly adapting to changes in the corporate environment, it is important to realise that the nature of organisational culture may once again change significantly in the new millennium.

When Pettigrew first introduced the term organisational culture in 1979, he defined culture as "the system of publicly given and collectively accepted meanings operating for a given group at a given time". He went on to include aspects such as symbols, language, ideology, belief, ritual and myth in his definition (Grieco, 1988: 84-87).  However, the inclusion of organisational culture in the study of organisational life became popular only in the 1980s (Bate, 1990: 83; Fine, 1995: 21; Moran & Volkwein, 1992 19-47; Sinclair, 1993: 63-73). Fine (1995: 21) suggests that this popularity stems from the fact that researchers were moving away from the traditional approaches that focused predominantly on structure and towards more interpretive theories of human behaviour.  Although the concept of organisational culture has enjoyed widespread appeal for the past decade, Bate (1990: 83) implies that it must still prove itself in terms of successful application in business.

Fine (1995: 21-25) maintains that the earlier work on organisational culture was based on organisational climate, character, image and ideology, but that a shift towards social construction took place during the merger and acquisition era of the 1980s. Although the theory of social construction does not exclude other existing theories, it focuses on seeing individuals as interdependent on their community, nation and species. According to Vallance (1995), social construction is based on shared characteristics, which are passed on through language. For example, when first joining a new organisation, the way in which things are done might seem foreign to new employees, but after some time, these employees adapt the same practices and share them with the rest of the organisation. This might include dress codes, interaction with colleagues and superiors, and how decisions are made.

However, Fine (1995: 560) argues that the view of organisational culture as a commonly held belief by all members of the organisation is flawed as it was based on a predominantly white male perspective that did not take into consideration the introduction of women and other cultures to the American workforce. This argument led to the inclusion of the concept of workplace diversity in organisational culture studies.

## 6.  METHODOLOGY

The context for this study was the provincial head office of a national South African financial institution, ABSA, with fifty-four branches in the Western Cape. Interviews were conducted with selected employees to ascertain whether respondents had an individualistic or collectivist tendency in the way in which they viewed work functions. The responses were measured against specific work-related themes from the Hansen and Kahnweiler 1993 corporate culture study to determine the influence of home language and culture on the organisational environment. This is explored later in the article.

The financial and business services sector of ABSA in the Western Cape contributed 17.4% of the Gross Domestic Product of the province in 2000, which makes the selection of a financial institution relevant in terms of its overall importance in the province. Employees are categorised into the following six hierarchical levels.

| HIERARCHICAL LEVELS | JOB DESCRIPTIONS | EMPLOYEE NUMBERS |
|---|---|---|
| Level A | Cleaning/maintenance | 144 |
| Level B | Clerical | 1 752 |
| Level C | Specialists/consultants | 433 |
| Level T | Supervisory | 364 |
| Level M & P | Branch managers/ management specialists | 293 |
| TOTAL | | 2 986 |

The participants chosen in the study are employed in supervisory or managerial positions and represent the three predominant language groups in the Western Cape. As can be seen from the above table, the size of South African organisations necessitates a smaller sample size to ensure balance between gender and language. Due to the fact that the proportions of blacks, coloured and women in managerial positions are smaller that the number of white males, the authors had to select five respondents in each category to avoid threatening the balance of the study.

Qualitative researchers have been criticised for not drawing large samples from theoretically meaningful populations and although the sample size is admittedly much smaller than would have been the case if this were a quantitative research study, the authors contend that the depth and richness of the narrative compensate for the sample size. The authors' decision to select only one organisation should be viewed against the backdrop of the current South African situation. Organisations are being subjected to scrutiny from both the government and the general population regarding the cultural representation of their workforce. Employee uncertainties regarding job security and the intention of this research study should also be taken into account. Other potential companies considered for this study were particularly sensitive to comparative studies and regarded confidentiality seriously. The above sensitivities are reduced significantly by only selecting one organisation for interviews.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty members from a sample population of 567 employees in supervisory and managerial positions. The respondents were selected according to the three predominant cultural groups of the Western Cape, namely Xhosa, Afrikaans and English, with an equal male/female distribution. Each respondent provided approximately 45 to 60 minutes of narrative. The interviews were recorded verbatim and transcribed. This produced approximately forty hours of narrative, which was explored by means of narrative analysis.

## 7. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AS A RESEARCH TOOL

According to Berger (1997: 6-12) narratives form part of our daily lives as they provide us with a method to learn about the world and a means of telling others what we have learned. People are exposed to various narratives on a daily basis, including fictional narratives on radio and television, in novels, comic strips and fairy tales as well as real life narratives in conversations, journals and psychotherapy. People are involved in conversations not only as speakers and listeners, but also as representatives of social categories, groups, communities and cultures (Van Dijk, 1997: 1-38).

Coffey & Atkinson (1996: 51-68) maintain that narratives of everyday life are used not only to build and share cultural values, meanings and personal experiences, but also to express power and influence. Although organisational studies have become popular with social scientists, the use of the narrative analysis as a method of enquiry is fairly recent (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993). Hansen & Kahnweiler (1993) maintain that the analysis of narratives in an organisation can be used to examine interpersonal relationships found in organisational cultures, and subcultures as narratives act as a cultural code. Coffey

& Atkinson (1996: 51-68) concur and add that narratives present a way of retelling key experiences and events that can be used to pass on cultural heritage and organisational culture.

The narratives were coded and explored to identify recurring patterns or thoughts expressed by the respondents. Coffey & Atkinson (1996: 32) describe coding as a process of identifying key themes and patterns, and organising data into analysable units by creating various categories. The authors used questions adapted from Singelis' Self-Construal Scale (Rao et al.1999, Singelis, 1994: 580-591) as this scale focuses predominantly on individualistic and collective tendencies and has been used extensively internationally.

The responses were coded into the following five categories, modified from the Hansen and Kahnweiler 1993 corporate culture study:

- Self-concept - the individual's view of him/herself in the organisational environment
- Conflict - the individual's reaction to, and involvement in, conflict situations and how he/she views conflict resolution
- Interaction - the individual's interplay with other members in the organisation, specifically those from different cultural groups
- Decision-making - how individuals perceive the current decision-making process in the organisation
- Power distance - expectations and assumptions about other cultural groups

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by using the NUD*IST Vivo software package. This package was selected as it provides the researcher with a tool capable of linking and recording narratives, and searching and exploring complex patterns derived from the narratives. Specific attributes were ascribed to each respondent based on demographic questions on age, language preferences, work experience and position in the company.   Another set of Boolean attributes was created based on the responses to the collective and individualistic sections of the Singelis questionnaire.  All the responses to a specific question were linked together to enable the authors to make comparisons between each respondent's feedback.

## 8.   FINDINGS

### 8.1  Self-construal

The category on Self-Construal dealt with the respondents' self-concept and group behaviour.  This included masculinity and femininity as well as collectivist and individualistic properties.  It was argued that the theory of social construction focused on seeing individuals as interdependent on their community, nation and species, and that social construction was based on shared characteristics, which are passed on through language.  Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv & Sanders (1990) maintain that individualistic cultures might be more concerned with their own and immediate family's interests, while collectivist cultures feel strongly about loyalty to the groups to which they belong.  This attitude was supported specifically by the Afrikaans and English women, but has to be viewed against the multiple roles of professionals, wives and mothers that women play in the South African society.

### 8.1.1   Modesty

In contrast with the Western acceptance of self-advancement, many cultures, specifically those with predominantly collectivist tendencies, admire modesty. Although this organisation was governed by Western influences, most respondents felt that overt self-promotion was unacceptable. Although most respondents admitted to admiration for modesty, discrepancies existed regarding the cause of this attitude and few related it back to their cultural backgrounds. Specifically Xhosa respondents traced their attitude towards modesty to their culture.

### 8.1.2   Cultural perceptions

Participants' reactions revealed that a cultural sensitivity exists in the South African context and that this spills over into the corporate environment. The respondents declared a significant influence in their self-perception due to their interaction with other cultures in the working environment and readily admitted to concerns raised by cultural diversity and how it influenced the corporate culture. Several respondents reflected on race as a behavioural influence, but as this remains a sensitive issue in the South African context, it was difficult to gauge accurately the impact it had on the individual.

### 8.1.3   Corporate change

In during the past decade, South African corporate society had to undergo significant changes, which led to resentment in several subcultures. Earlier it was argued that although distinct differences existed between organisational and national cultures, all organisational cultures were influenced to some extent by the larger cultures in which they are functioning. Several participants referred to the cultural diversity of the organisation as a major factor requiring changes.

## 8.2  Conflict

This category dealt with gender issues, group harmony and loyalty as well as conflict situations and the directness of communication approaches. Although all the respondents admitted to conflict occurring in their working environment, few references were made to language or cultural differences as causes contributing to conflict. Due to the historical and socio-political backdrop of South African society, it has to be considered that cultural diversity as a conflict contributor is viewed with sensitivity for fear of accusations of ethnocentricity, stereotyping or racism.

### 8.2.1   Gender

However, gender inequality, whether real or perceived, was offered as one of the main reasons for conflict in the company. Cognisance must be taken of South Africa's historical employment record and the fact that corporate South Africa and particularly the banking industry were predominantly male dominated. Although the gender bias has changed rapidly in the past decade, most organisations still feature a male-dominated management structure. Several of the female respondents directly attributed gender differences and the employment history in the company as causes of conflict. According to the female participants, the company's gender profile had changed significantly in the past few

years and many women had been appointed in supervisory and managerial positions – often over male colleagues, which further contributed to feelings of distrust and resentment between the genders.

Some male respondents also admitted that their behaviour is governed by a culture with highly developed masculine tendencies. These statements validated the researchers' opinion that masculine cultures expected men to be ambitious and competitive and women to care and serve. Although women are playing an increasingly dominant role in the South African corporate scenario, the findings of this study indicate that their assumption of senior level management positions is still cause for conflict in the working environment, specifically with Afrikaans-speaking male colleagues.

### 8.2.2    Cultural approaches to conflict

The different cultural groups offered varying approaches to conflict management. Based on the responses from the various interviewees, it is evident that the English group was markedly more accepting of conflict than the Afrikaans and Xhosa groups. While the English-speaking men and women were quite willing to deal directly with conflict situations, the Afrikaans group was more reluctant to initiate conflict and the Xhosa group would avoid conflict in order to maintain harmony in the group situation. Once again, the gender influence was played out and the female respondents were generally more willing to regard conflict as a negative occurrence.

The Afrikaans women revealed a non-confrontational approach and placed emphasis on listening as a method of resolving conflict situations. Although they did not back down from conflict, it was clear that they would not deliberately cause conflict and would prefer to maintain harmony in the group. In contrast, the English women were more confrontational, specifically concerning work-related issues. Several also quoted the language difference as a cause of conflict. Both the Afrikaans and English men cited personality differences and job-related issues as major causes of conflict. Although they would not necessarily instigate the conflict, they tended not to address it in a group situation, but to handle it on a one-on-one basis.

The Xhosa respondents were far more concerned with maintaining harmony in the group. The women tried to avoid conflict and expressed a reluctance to become confrontational, while the men also expressed a reluctance to become involved in conflict situations, but were more willing to approach the other person and discuss the matter openly.

Although the acceptance of cultural diversity has been promoted vigorously since the 1994 democratic elections, some of the historic antagonism and mistrust still exist and this plays out particularly with language use. The narratives from all the respondents concurred with Capozzoli's suggestion (1995) that group membership does not preclude conflict and that diverse cultural values, attitudes, needs, expectations, perceptions, resources and personalities could be potential causes of conflict in organisations

### 8.2.3    Performance evaluation

Many motivational theories are based on the presumption that people are not only

motivated by money, but that self-esteem, appreciation and security also play an important role. It was argued earlier that the South African organisational culture was a manifestation of Western influences, instead of including African traditions and cultures, which focus on a community concept of management. This argument was validated when the issues of performance appraisal and the subsequent rewards or acknowledgements were raised with the respondents. The respondents' perceptions of this system within the ABSA culture reflected a distinct discrepancy between the various groups. Although most of the respondents accepted and even craved acknowledgement, the execution of these rewards and the matter of inclusivity proved problematic for many. Some respondents expressed discomfort with the reward system in general.

A strong emphasis on group effort and recognition was revealed, which showed remarkable similarities to the Eastern management practices where group commitment was preferable to individual performance. Some respondents still adhered to the dictates of American corporate society, which traditionally focused strongly on individual achievement with a strong emphasis on reward, promotion and competitiveness.

## 8.3 Interaction

### 8.3.1 Meetings

Meetings form part of one of the most commonly used methods of communicating in organisations. In the South African environment, English has been identified as the accepted language of use and this acceptance was verified by the fact that most respondents preferred English as their language of choice in the working environment. However, the authors maintain that language differences can lead to opposing perceptions of meetings by different cultural groups. The respondents were questioned about their participation in meetings, and both the Afrikaans and English groups indicated the willingness to participate and provide their own opinions during such forums. Many ascribed this attitude towards public speaking as part of their personalities and cultural background. Despite the Xhosa cultural heritage of a strong oral history, the Xhosa respondents were not that comfortable with speaking out during meetings. This could be attributed to the language difference as the majority of the meetings were conducted in English.

### 8.3.2 Formality vs informality

Individualistic cultures use direct communication to reduce uncertainty when communicating, while collective cultures use indirect communication. One of the questions posed to the respondents dealt with informal approaches to clients. This issue was greatly influenced by the cultural backgrounds of the respondents. Many of the Afrikaans- and Xhosa-speaking respondents preferred a more formal form of address and related the preference back to their upbringing and cultural background. Although the Xhosa respondents, specifically the women, adopted the informal form of address in the working environment, they reverted to cultural norms in the community.

English-speaking respondents indicated a preference for more informal communication and forms of address. The various narratives from the respondents did, however, indicate

that a corporate preference for informality existed and was adhered to. From the responses during the interviews, the authors conclude that the corporate norm in the group shows preference for a more informal approach both towards colleagues and clients. Although some cultural groups such as the Xhosa and Afrikaans find this informality foreign, the narratives show that they adapt to the accepted corporate preference and revert to their own cultural preferences outside the work environment. This approach is indicative of the influence of a strong corporate culture on the behaviour of the individual. It is, however, significant, that the respondents who expressed discomfort with informality still adhered to culturally acceptable behaviour in their personal capacity.

### 8.3.3    Direct interaction

The respondents were asked whether they changed their communication habits to adapt to different individuals. Specific allowances and changes in communication methods were also made for subordinates or superiors. The reactions to this question showed that most individuals would adjust their communication to accommodate other people and that sensitivity remained where members from diverse cultures were concerned. This phenomenon has been responsible for many misconceptions between the various cultural groups in the South African society – both corporate and social. Many white South Africans have stereotyped the communication style of African cultures as vague and circumspect due to the indirect method of interaction. However, this avoidance of direct communication shows correlation with the Xhosa culture and Asian preferences. Different communication styles are cited as causes of conflict in the corporate environment and the blanket acceptance of English as the language of commerce has caused resentment within cultural groups.

### 8.4 Decision-making

The authors argue that an organisation's decision-making processes directly reflect its organisational culture. The general tendency in all respondent groups was to recognise decisions, that were accepted by the majority of the group. The consideration of benefit to the company or greater good to group objectives was also expressed as a reason for accepting decisions, that went against the individual's opinion. It was generally accepted that the sacrifice of self-interest for group benefit was essential.

Although acceptance of majority decision was the norm among respondents, they were willing to offer their own opinion when not in agreement. The respondents' reactions to consensus decision-making could be attributed to the acceptance of democratic principles after the 1994 elections. The groups generally viewed decision-making as fair, as long as the majority of the group supported the specific decision.

The Xhosa group expressed specific acceptance of majority decision. This finding reinforces Mbigi's recommendation for the incorporation of Xhosa cultural heritage, such as their acceptance of consensus decision-making, into the South African organisational culture.

On the question of decision-making, it appears as if the organisational approach in the organisation is the acceptance of consensus decision-making. If this attitude is measured

against Fine's argument that the collectivist nature of some cultures plays a critical role in the decision-making processes as the individual is required to put the well-being of the group before his or her own, the corporate culture within the group accepts a predominantly collectivist tendency as opposed to individualistic trends.

### 8.5 Power distance

Perceptions on authority, the importance of showing respect, and perceptions of leadership in terms of career advice and mentoring were explored. Specific attention was paid to the behaviour between employees of different ranks and how this inequality is accepted by specific cultures. The authors are of the opinion that existing cultural influences such as chivalry towards women and reverence of age play an important role in how authority, respect and leadership are perceived within a group.

The responses from the Afrikaans women indicated that working relationships were based strongly on the issue of respect and authority. Although the members of this group hold positions of seniority in the company, they admit to a reluctance to express their authority and feel the need to downplay their managerial positions. This phenomenon can be traced back to the traditionally accepted role of Afrikaans women in a very patriarchal society, which was definitely more subservient. It was customary for the women to be mothers and housewives, while the husbands fulfilled the roles of sole breadwinners. When women did enter the job market, it was still in the roles of caregivers in occupations such as nursing and teaching. The historical predominance of men in managerial positions in the organisation has led to a situation where the lines between patriarchal attitudes and authority have been shrouded by gender resentment and feelings of entitlement.

Within the organisation, respect for authority figures is influenced not necessarily by the position of an individual, but by the individual's expertise and experience. The respondents show a preference for managers who commanded respect through their actions rather than demanding respect due to their level of seniority.

Within the organisational culture, it becomes clear that gender issues further obscured the respondents' perceptions of respect and authority. Many of the male respondents mention their cultural backgrounds as a basis for their reaction to their female colleagues. Researchers have stated that the different subcultures in a workforce can have a direct influence on the organisational culture. This notion was proved by the Xhosa group of respondents who maintained the strong African cultural tendency of respect for leader figures and elders.

### 8.5.1   Mentoring

During the period of the study, it was found that no official mentoring programme existed in the corporate structure. Although most respondents identified a particular person they regarded as a mentor and advisor, a more formalised programme could be beneficial to the establishment of a united corporate culture. In view of the fact that the employment arena is still undergoing rapid changes in profile, expertise and experience should be playing a more significant role. Many of the mentors were identified as members of the

Afrikaans male category, but this has to be considered against the company's previous employment profile. From the feedback of the female respondents, it also becomes evident that same gender mentoring is preferable. Several respondents commented on the fact that mentoring was not actively promoted in the organisation and expressed a willingness to take advice from other sources.

9.   CONCLUSION

The narratives from the respondents indicate that individual cultures have a strong influence on how perceptions of organisational structures such as conflict management, interaction during meetings, decision-making and acceptance of authority are formed.

It was, however, also evident that a strong corporate culture exists in the ABSA group. The ABSA brand has become very prominent in the public eye since the group amalgamated in 1996 and the brand was launched in 1998. According to the 2002 Markinor-Sunday Times Top Brands Survey, ABSA was voted the most loved financial services brand in the country.

The company was also ranked seventh among the top ten 'Most Admired South African Companies' in the same survey, the highest rating received by any of the South African banks. The survey is conducted among adults 16 years and older, living in residential homes in South Africa, and includes all races, geographical areas and income groups. A total of 3 500 personal, face-to-face interviews were conducted in nineteen different categories. The group was also awarded the Bank of the Year 2003 award by The Banker of London magazine, published by The Financial Times Group of London.

The company came first in the Best Company to Work Survey conducted by Deloitte and Touche Human Capital Corporation in October 2003. The survey analyses three main inputs: from executives/employers, comprising the CEO plus the executive team, a random sample of employees and a market contribution. A heavier weighting is given to employee ratings than to employer input, whereas the market dimension deals with the awareness of the organisations and how the market would rank them. When scores differ notably between employer and employee responses, there is clearly a perception difference, which indicates that employers are not in tune with employee attitudes – a warning that a particular issue needs attention. In May 2005, Barclays Bank became a major shareholder in ABSA, indicating a vote of confidence from the international banking community.

Although the authors are confident that the research sample was of sufficient size to provide validity in this study, future researchers might be interested in replicating Singelis's Self-Construal Scale on a bigger sample of the South African population. As this research revealed a prevailing corporate culture in the ABSA group, it could be relevant to repeat this study across organisations as well as hierarchical levels as this should provide relevant insights into the question of whether South African corporate cultures could dominate individual cultural tendencies. It could also be of interest to select samples with higher homogeneity in terms of demographics such as age, educational levels and home language.

The management and perception of conflict in organisations and the impact that cultural differences could have on conflict resolution are areas in which insufficient research has been conducted from a local South African perspective. Exploration of the causes for intercultural conflict could provide valuable data for corporate society.

## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the narratives derived during the interviews for this study, the authors gained valuable insight into the different elements, that form the basis for a strong corporate culture in the ABSA group. Although these are based on a distinct perspective of one organisation, South African corporate society could draw significant information from this study.

- Based on the distinct discrepancies in the respondents' perceptions of the reward and recognition systems employed in the organisation, the authors recommend that the method of performance evaluation and feedback be reconsidered. The minority of respondents expressed complete ease with public acknowledgements and a large number showed preference for praise and rewards in a group or team environment. The strong emphasis on group acknowledgement and the importance that team structures played in the narrative shows that the traditionally accepted focus on individual performance in the workplace should be reconsidered and adapted for the South African context.

- Due to the rapidly changing face of the South African corporate community, the authors suggest that the implementation of a formalised mentoring structure be considered. The demographic profile obtained in this study show an increase in younger managers/supervisors. Although these younger managerial staff members are normally well qualified theoretically, they could nevertheless benefit tremendously from the expertise and experience of older colleagues. Mentoring could also play a significant role in the establishment of a corporate culture that incorporates individual cultural preferences while maintaining crucial internally acceptable elements. A more formalised mentoring programme could assist in creating synergy between subcultures in the working environment as it would create closer contact between members from different cultural groups

- Individualistic versus collective perceptions regarding group loyalty were evident, specifically in individuals' responses regarding the differences in behaviour at work and in their personal lives. This could also be attributed to the fact that most respondents adhere to the rules of the corporate culture while at work and then revert to their own individual cultural preferences outside the workplace. Although post-democratic South Africa celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2004, the analysis of the narratives provided by the thirty respondents still indicates a marked unawareness of specific cultural preferences. Specific communication styles adopted by the Afrikaans, English and Xhosa groups in the ABSA group and the intercultural perceptions that are maintained show that intercultural differences are still contributing to

conflict and misconceptions occurring in the corporate environment, and employees need to be enlightened on these cultural elements. The authors strongly recommend that South African corporate society institute formal cultural awareness training programmes to assist in demystifying the perceived cultural idiosyncrasies. Employees should be shown the need for tolerance of various cultural manifestations as expressed by their colleagues and the best way of creating this is by deconstructing the myths surrounding different cultures.

- The narratives from the various female groups, specifically the Afrikaans and English women showed that gender issues are strong contributors to interpersonal conflict in ABSA. It has to be taken into account that most South African cultures are historically extremely patriarchal and that women in the workplace, specifically in positions of seniority, is a fairly new phenomenon. This is an area that has not been given the same prominence as cultural diversity and is therefore not viewed with the same sensitivity. However, since the Employment Equity Act clearly states that women are considered a designated group, it can be inferred that the face of the South African management is bound to change to include even more women. Viewed against this fact, it is vital for organisations to address gender inequalities not only in terms of salaries, but also recognition and support for female staff on all hierarchical levels.

The authors are of the opinion that the increase in sexual harassment cases against employers could be attributed to a lack of sensitivity when dealing with gender issues.

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