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The impact of organisational culture as a context of interpersonal meaning on the management of organisational diversity

ABSTRACT

Changes in the South African business environment is placing South African business organisations under increasing pressure to move toward democratic, non-racial and fully representative organisational structures. In an attempt to accelerate this process, companies are embarking on affirmative action and black empowerment programmes in order to develop previously disadvantaged groups and to assimilate these groups into existing organisation cultures. The results of these efforts are viewed with interest and scepticism. This article explores the link between organisational communication and successful diversity management. An overview of existing literature indicates that successful diversity management is facilitated by communication processes through which sufficient shared or negotiated meaning and agreed upon language and behaviours appropriate to the workplace are constructed. This article explores the importance of interpersonal communication in organisational sensemaking through the framework of the Schemata Model of Interpersonal Communication in Organisational Contexts. The results of the empirical research indicate that individuals' experiences of the organisational culture as a context for the construction of meaning, are more important to diversity management than individual value differences as a result of diversity in terms of age, gender or race.

**This article is based on a Masters Dissertation completed by Charmain Dombai under supervision of Prof Sonja Verwey in the Department of Communication, Rand Afrikaans University. This article was also presented as a paper at the International Intercultural Communication Conference held in Miami, April 1998.*

INTRODUCTION

Diversity and the management thereof have in recent years become the subject of many heated and emotive debates. It has also become a lucrative source of income for many management and organisational development consultants, due to the fact that numerous organisations experience great difficulty in coming to terms with diversity. Although the South African workforce has always been diverse, the largely homogeneous management and white-collar structures created the perception of a homogeneous workforce. This led to corporate cultures in which diversity and differences were virtually disregarded.

With the advent of the post-apartheid South Africa, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on individuals' rights as entrenched in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In organisations the focus has changed from perpetuating homogeneity to actively introducing diversity into the management structures through initiatives such as affirmative action and black empowerment.

It is therefore necessary to examine the ways in which organisations can manage their diverse workforce in the best possible way - mainly because it is an economical imperative. To this end a number of South African studies have been initiated to examine the requirements for effective diversity management programmes. Van Sittert Triebel's study (1996:xi), for example, found that the main shortcomings in organisations were the lack of coherent strategic visioning in the approach to diversity management, as well as the lack of planned, structured and well developed communication strategies.

Increasingly, research results are assessing the relationship between organisational communication and successful diversity management (Allen, 1995; Kassek & Zonia, 1994; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1994). Research results such as those of Zak (1994) indicate that dysfunctional diversity outcomes seem to stem from the failure of management to foster communication processes through which sufficient shared or negotiated meaning, and agreed upon language and behaviour appropriate to the workplace can be constructed. According to Pepper (1995:13) communication between two organisational members is of extraordinary importance in the organisation because *organising* is most fundamental at the dyadic level.

It would seem from an overview of available literature that organisations can only manage their diverse workforces successfully when their corporate cultures are receptive to and supportive of diversity. The success of diversity management depends on the ability of organisational management to foster communication processes through which appropriate plural workplace cultures can be negotiated and expanded to accommodate the diversity of their people (Verwey, 1998:384). Language, as one of the most basic

elements of culture, is a key determinant of corporate culture. In constructing an organisational cultural paradigm, Johnson, (in Reed & Hughes, 1992) states that organisational cultures are seemingly socially sanctioned symbolic networks; "*symbolic acts within an organisation can be powerful because as interpretations they are vivid, emotive, and are able to embrace excessive ambiguity and in appropriate settings seem to have a life of their own.*" Therefor the assumption is that the quality of the interpersonal or dyadic relationships in the organisation will have a significant influence on the organisational culture. Turner (in Reed & Hughes, 1992:54) is of the opinion that symbolic elements constitute the organisation's mode of being, enabling members to define collective needs and wants. They specify collective identity and an understanding of the roles by which they should deal with one another. Hence the view that the processes according to which individuals communicate and share meaning in an organisation will have a significant impact on successful diversity management due to its influence on the culture as a context of diversity management. The management of diversity has to be seen as a comprehensive management process, whereby leaders mobilise and enact a shared system of meaning by articulating and defining what has remained implicit and by providing followers with a means of making sense of their experiences. Organisational culture can thus be defined as a system of shared symbols and meanings in which organisations are "*social constructions, symbolically constituted and reproduced through interaction.*" (Smircich, in Hood & Koberg, 1994:161).

In examining the variables impacting on organisational culture and the sharing of meaning between individuals, Beamer's (1995) concept of schemata was applied to the organisational context.

THE SCHEMATA MODEL OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

No one-dimensional, static model can ever pinpoint the dynamic process of human communication with complete accuracy. The Schemata Model for Intercultural Encounters (Beamer, 1995) is no exception. Its value, however, lies in the fact that it recognises that the sharing of meaning involves much more than the manifest meanings contained in the actual spoken or written words.

The whole individual, including his or her background, culture, attitudes, socialisation, values and beliefs are involved in the process. Added to that, the total environment within which the interaction takes place also influences the extent to which the intended meaning of one party concurs with the meaning received, and acted upon, by the other party (Beamer, 1995).

Beamer's Schemata Model for Intercultural Encounters (1995:141) proposes that if the

culture of another person or organisation is so unlike one's own, or is so unfamiliar that similar meanings cannot be attributed, then the more one finds out about the unlike or unknown culture, the better one's chance of success in communicating with it.

The concept of Schemata

The term *schemata* refers to organised categories and their associations, held in a cognitive framework, possessing affect and forming attitudes, values, expectations, norms, rules and unstated assumptions (Beamer, 1995:144). These generalised, stereotypical conceptualisations of culture are constructed from a limited amount of knowledge, fleshed out through generalisations and stereotypes. Based on these schemata, people form expectations and value judgements about the behaviour of the other person or group.

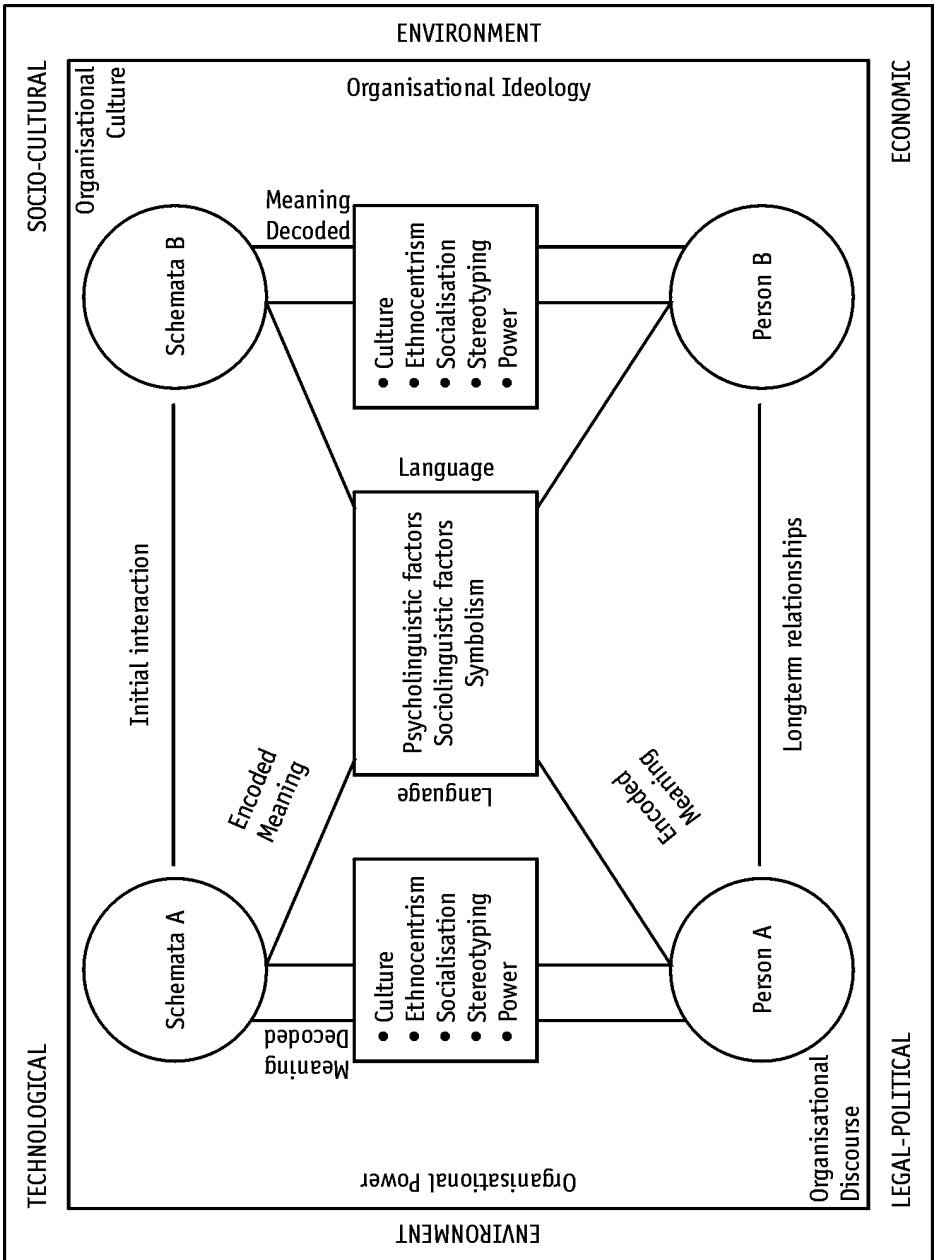
Individuals conceptualise and order the relatively unfamiliar by using their pre-existing mental categories or schemata, supplied by their culture (Casmir, 1995:144). The communicator imagines or projects what the other culture must be like, and adopts previously learned strategies for encoding a message and transmitting it (Casmir, 1995:145). The projections that speakers have of other cultures are schemata of varying complexity, depending upon how much about the culture is known. One's projected schema of another culture is based largely on one's own culture, perhaps even to a greater degree than on data collected about the other culture. According to attribution theory, we all try to make meaning of behaviour by attributing it to causes from the situational context and from personality (Casmir, 1995:145). In intercultural communication, when information is incomplete, meaning is inferred based on preconceptions of how certain causes produce certain effects. The priorities in one's own culture predict the characteristics that one looks for in another culture. This can obviously lead to distortion in the schemata of what is important, compared to what actually is important in the other culture (Beamer, 1995:146).

From the above discussion it is evident that all messages sent by the communicator is filtered through his or her schemata of the other culture, and in the same way, all incoming messages are also filtered in the process of ascribing meaning to what is being communicated.

In adapting Beamer's Schemata Model for Intercultural Encounters (1995) to the context of diversity management in organisations, it was necessary to broaden the scope of the model beyond the interpersonal intercultural context to include a wider variety of variables and contexts. This adaptation was prompted mainly by the fact that by limiting the application of the model to intercultural communication contexts, it is

implied that the members of a given organisational culture are homogeneous and that schemata only come into play when the communicators' backgrounds differ. The expansion of the Schemata Model to the broader organisational context, broadens the applicability of the proposed model to include a broader range of organisational contexts than merely the intercultural .

Figure 1: Schemata Model - Organisational Context



The adapted Schemata Model for Interpersonal Organisational Contexts extensively adapts Beamer's Schemata Model for Intercultural Communication Contexts by incorporating a number of variables not considered in Beamer's (1995) model. In the following three sections the elements and dynamics of the proposed Schemata Model for Interpersonal Organisational Contexts will be discussed in greater detail in terms of the three organisational levels they incorporate.

External environment level

According to systems theory, the organisation is not independent and isolated from its environment. It is, rather, highly dependent on and greatly influenced by the environment within which it functions (Gerber, Nel & Van Dyk, 1998:34). The technological, legal-political, economical and socio-cultural environments shape the marketplace in which the organisation competes, and also directly influence the communities out of which the organisation draws its workforce (Verwey, 1990:145). Through employees, customers and competitors the external environment permeates the borders of the organisation.

This interaction is not a one-way process. The organisation also influences its environment through its impacts on its employees' lives, as well as the community through its impact on the natural environment, social investment efforts and the development of infrastructure (Gerber *et al*, 1998). This mutual influence and interdependence between an organisation and its environment is represented by a broken line in the model to indicate the permeability of the organisational borders.

Internal organisational environment level

The organisational environment in which organisation members engage in communication is determined by the organisational culture, discourse, ideology and power relationships. In reality, these four elements are not as clearly distinguishable from each other as the model suggests, but rather act as interdependent elements creating a context within which interpersonal relationships are engaged.

Power relationships play a determinant role in interpersonal communication in that it defines the relationship between the participants as that of superior to subordinate, or that of equals communicating from similar power bases. Scollon and Scollon (1995:42) refer to this as "*the vertical disparity between participants in a hierarchical structure.*" The way in which the participants perceive the power relationship will determine the dynamics of the interaction in terms of, for instance, the way in which the individuals will address one another, the topics they will feel comfortable to discuss, as well as the levels of openness, honesty and self-disclosure present in the interaction.

Organisational ideology and discourse are very closely linked in the sense that the organisation's values and priorities, as defined by its ideology, determine the discourse, or system of communication, used by the organisation and its members. Ideology determines what can be discussed and what not, it determines the content of discussions, as well as the way in which events and experiences are interpreted. In this sense, the discourse system perpetuates and maintains the ideology according to which the organisation functions. Mumby (in Jablin & Putnam, 1997:17) sees organisational discourse as "*in fact, a resource that controls organisational goals... (and) an intersubjective process in which what counts as power involves struggles over meaning.*" While organisational members have a free choice in terms of interpreting their organisational experiences, it is mediated through power relations in the organisation.

Organisational culture can be regarded as the overall framework within which the discourse system, power relationships and ideology function. Conversely, the culture is also continuously defined and redefined through the discourse system, power relationships and the organisational ideology. In this regard Mumby (in Jablin & Putnam, 1997:33) concludes that "*those group(s) that are best able to "fix" meaning and articulate it to its own interests is the one best able to maintain and reproduce relations of power.*" It can thus be stated that culture influences and is influenced by the other three elements.

The process of sharing meaning at the interpersonal level

The creation and functioning of schemata were discussed earlier, but the variables that influence the creation of schemata in the organisational contexts need further elaboration.

The first three variables to be discussed influence both the organisational member's schema of him/ herself, but also the schemata (s)he has of the other party in the communication process. The last two elements to be discussed, also influence each communicator's schemata of the other communicator, but not to the same extent each communicator's schema of him/herself.

- The communicators' **cultures** and ethnic backgrounds have a major role to play in determining the individual's world-view, as well as regarding his or her orientation towards people of other cultures. In most instances, people define themselves in terms of their culture and associate themselves closer with people sharing a similar background and culture, than with members of so-called out-groups (Cox, 1993).
- **Ethnocentrism** is closely linked to culture and ethnicity, and refers to the phenomenon that people tend to regard their own culture as superior to other cultures, and consequently also regard themselves as superior to members of other cultures.
- The **socialisation** processes an individual was subjected to is a further factor co-

determining the way in which an individual would view him or herself in relation to other individuals. Especially in the organisational context, socialisation plays a very important role in establishing the organisational member's perceived place in the hierarchy. Pluralistic socialisation for example, allows individuals to retain their identity and to contribute the strength of their diversity to the organisation (Fuhr, 1992:10). Assimilation as a process of socialisation on the other hand, expects of individuals to forsake their identity in favour of the organisation's culture and way of doing.

- **Stereotyping** refers to the process of using overgeneralisations as foundation on which to build expectations and assumptions about the behaviour and reactions of other people (Cox, 1993:85). Not only are assumptions and expectations about behaviour created, but value judgements are made about the behaviour and the motives attributed to these actions. The actions of one member of a specific group are furthermore generalised to apply to the whole group; conversely, the perceived actions of the group as a whole are believed to be true for each individual member of the group. Factors that are closely related to stereotyping are prejudice and attitudes (Cox, 1993). Prejudice can be viewed as the outcome of stereotyping, whereas attitudes are also determined by prejudices. Both prejudice and attitude can be viewed as conduits through which stereotypes are turned into action and behaviour.
- **Power** relationships determine how people view one another in terms of the potential impact one person is likely to have on the other's life and destiny. People who are perceived to have more power, regardless of the source, are likely to be treated with more respect which would mean that communicator A would take more care in selecting the terms in which to address communicator B, as well as the content of the conversation. Communicator B on the other hand, will have nothing to lose and would probably be more careless in his or her communication.

Having explored the elements that influence the creation of schemata's, the foundation has been laid to proceed with a discussion of the dynamics through which meaning is shared in a dyadic organisational communication process.

All messages that pass from communicator A to communicator B pass through three sets of filters.

1. The first set of filters include those elements that influence the creation of schemata - both in terms of how the person views him/herself and the other party in the interaction. When the message passes through these filters, the individual clears the meaning of it in their own mind and makes certain decisions regarding the way

in which the message has to be encoded in order to best convey the intended meaning. At this point, the individual employee utilises his or her schemata about the other person to decide which words to use, which non-verbal communication codes will best serve the purpose of the message, and also what the costs or benefits of the sharing process could be. Communicator A will also attempt to anticipate and predict communicator B's reactions and responses to the message.

2. The second set of filters specifically concern language, both in terms of the particular language communicator A chooses to use, (for example Zulu as opposed to English), as well as the specific words or phrases (s)he chooses, (such as freedom fighter instead of terrorist). Language as a phenomenon includes various elements that determine its use at the dyadic or interpersonal level. These elements also determine the level of distortion or enhancement of the message, whether it is spoken or written, while it is being encoded into language.
- The relationship between language and thought, as studied by *psycholinguistics*, provides meaningful insights into organisational members' reasons for choosing certain words and phrases above others when engaging in a conversation. A very important insight provided by certain psycholinguists, such as Hunt and Agnoli (1991), is that there is no language that is unable to support a discussion about a specific topic, even when that language does not have the extended vocabulary another language may have. Where the vocabulary of a language is limited, communicators just experience considerable more difficulty to share meaning because concepts have to be clarified by means of lengthy and cumbersome explanations. In trying to avoid this cost, speakers of the first language may steer clear of such unfamiliar territory. In organisations then, the concept of *ubuntu*, may for instance, be virtually impossible to encode into meaningful terminology in Eurocentric organisations. As a result of this the organisational members may find it difficult to act out the principles of *ubuntu* as they do not clearly understand what is meant by it. This does not mean, however, that Eurocentric organisations are incapable of talking about, or practising, *ubuntu* - it just means that the cost, or effort it requires from their language and mental categories, is quite high.
 - *Symbolism* is a highly significant element of language use and communication (Wood, 1982). Symbols are often graphical, but also include genres of language use such as metaphors and organisational stories, myths and legends (Stoohart & Crous, 1993:57). In the organisational context symbols meet emotional needs of organisational members, but also help the organisation to achieve its goals and do its work. Symbols are viewed as a filter, because the meaning(s) attached to symbols tend to be highly individualistic or, at least, group specific. When deciding on a specific metaphor or story, communicator A would have to be more than reasonably

certain that communicator B would attach more or less the same value and meaning to the symbolism.

- **Sociolinguistics** researches the use of language in social contexts and is based on the premise that an understanding of the acquisition and use of language is based on an understanding of human attitudes, motivations, identities and intentions (Giles & St Clair, 1979). The theory of divergence and convergence (Giles & Smith, 1979:46), for instance, deals with how people would make a conscious effort to either behave more like, or more unlike, the other communicator, depending on how valuable or desirable future interactions are regarded to be. One of the most salient contributions of sociolinguistics is the phenomenon of inter-group biases. This theory posits that individuals tend to view the language use of the in-group more positively than that of the out-group even when members from both these groups engage in the same language use (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). The motivations and reasons for the in-group member's language use are attributed more positively than that of the out-group member. These findings are of particular importance in intercultural or diverse communication situations and means that communicator A would be more likely to ascribe the worst motivations to communicator B's reactions when they are not members of the same group. The theories of sociolinguistics are viewed as filters due to the possibility that communicators can wilfully distort their communication to serve certain social ends.
3. The third set of filters through which the message passes, is the same set which influences the creation of schemata in the minds of the communicators. By assuming the role of third set of filters, however, these elements are active on the part of the receiver of the message, at the level of decoding the encoded message received. Although the elements are the same, they will be applied differently in the mind of the receiver, or communicator B, due to his or her different background, values, culture and group membership. The view communicator B holds of communicator A will provide the framework within which B will go about decoding the message and getting to the meaning.

The final level at which the model aims to provide clarification, is that of how relationships develop and along with it, the communication behaviour of the participants. At the level of initial interaction, the suggestion is that people communicate from schema to schema. Due to the fact that they are unfamiliar with each other, the individuals have little else to depend on but their assumptions of the other person based on the group of which he or she is a member, as well as the image the other person chooses to portray (which may or may not differ significantly from who the person really is). As the relationship develops, however, the parties involved learn to trust one another and self-disclosure should increase. The result of this process should ideally be that

communicators A and B eventually find themselves in a long-term relationship in which the communication is person to person and the sharing of meaning only has to pass through the filter of language.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Given the nature and complexity of the issues to be examined, it was decided to conduct a multistep study incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The aim of the empirical research was to determine the validity of the Schemata Model for Interpersonal Organisational Contexts as framework for describing and analysing the interaction between a number of variables in the process whereby meaning is shared between individuals in an organisation.

In order to achieve this aim, a three pronged research framework was designed, in which the levels of analyses range from the general to the specific. The three levels that were analysed include the macro (external organisational), meso (internal organisational) and micro (interpersonal) levels, respectively.

On the first level, the external organisational environment of the selected organisation was analysed qualitatively in terms of four groups of influences identified in the model, namely technological, socio-cultural, legal-political and economic.

The second level of analysis was concerned with the internal organisational environment and a qualitative analyses of the selected organisation's internal environment, based in part on participant observation, was conducted. The four dimensions identified in the theoretical framework were used for the qualitative analysis. The internal organisation environment was analysed in terms of organisational culture, ideology, discourse and power.

The final level of analyses was concerned with the variables that influence the encoding and decoding of meaning between two individuals in an organisational context. In order to operationalise the deeply personal and mostly subconscious variables in question, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies was employed. On the quantitative level, a Personal Values Questionnaire developed by Graves, Beck & Cowan (see Dorfling, 1992) was used to measure individual values and a Semantic Differential Scale was developed to evaluate respondents' attitudes toward particular organisational constructs, which were identified to be relevant to the particular organisational context by means of a pilot study.

The personal values questionnaire that was used is based on Graves' "Emergent-cyclical

double-helix model of adult biopsychosocial behaviour" which was developed by Graves, Beck and Cowan of the National Values Centre in Texas, USA. The questionnaire was validated by Dr Sharon Underwood of the Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, and was obtained from and used with permission of the National Productivity Institute in Pretoria, South Africa.

The Semantic Differential Scale was based on the scale developed by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum in 1957 to measure respondents' attitudes towards a particular artefact, person or construct. A number of organisational concepts, which are open to different value-laden interpretations as a result of individual diversity in terms of gender, race, culture, and organisational position, were identified with the help of a focus group. The members of this focus group did not form part of the experimental group. Participants were given examples of bipolar semantic items that contained opposing adjectives at each extreme end of the scale, and were encouraged to identify those organisational "buzz words" which evoked different emotions and attitudes. Respondents were also asked to identify the bipolar semantic items that could be used to describe each of the concepts. The four constructs developed include the following concepts:

- Finesse is a project through which the whole organisation's financial and commercial systems will be integrated by means of new software to be installed throughout the organisation. More or less 10 000 organisational members' ways of working will be directly impacted, with the rest of the organisation affected more indirectly.
- Transformation refers to a government initiated change process aimed at fundamentally transforming the industry in which the particular organisation is a major role player.
- The performance management process in the particular company consists of a performance contract concluded between a supervisor and subordinate according to which the subordinate's performance is rated twice per annum.
- Training opportunities include both functional training and personal development.

This Semantic Differential Scale was given to the experimental group to complete.

The identity of the organisation in which the research was conducted is not revealed for business and ethical reasons. The phenomena that were investigated are also not restricted to any particular organisational context, thus rendering the need to identify the organisation in question redundant. The organisation that was selected for the research is a business unit which forms part of a big parastatal utility in South Africa. It has almost 40 000 employees working at different sites throughout the country. The

sample of 65 respondents represents 7.8% of the total number of 830 people employed in the specific business unit that was selected for analysis. The small sample size limits the validity of the findings, but was necessary in order to enable participant observation with a view to qualitative analysis of the internal organisational environment. A further limitation was the need to use an interpreter to explain the Values Questionnaire to illiterate and semi-literate respondents. The respondents' responses might have been contaminated due to mistakes in the recording of data, or the fact that respondents reacted to cues from the interpreter in the recording of responses.

RESULTS

Due to the limited scope of this article only the empirical results concerned with the encoding and decoding processes in interpersonal interactions are discussed. Results of the first and second level analyses will therefore not be reported on, except in instances where it clarifies and enhances the discussion of the interpersonal level results. Interpersonal level results will be discussed in terms of the findings of the Values Questionnaire and the Semantic Differential Scale. Variance between groups of respondents was measured by means of the Kruskal-Wallis Median Test. A significant variance between groups is indicated by a p-value of less than 0.05.

Values Questionnaire

On the whole, the Values Questionnaire did not reveal major value differences between the various demographic groups that were surveyed. Statistically significant variances showed in the following instances : family / clan values as well as power / domination values in the case of male and female respondents; family / clan values and system / interdependence values in the case of black and white respondents; and material success values in the case of supervisory and non-supervisory level respondents.

In the following table, the meaning of the coded dimensions are set out.

Code	Value System
BO	Family / clan
CP	Power / domination
DQ	Stability / conformity
ER	Material / success
FS	People / harmony
GT	System / interdependence

		BO	CP	DQ	ER	FS	GT
GENDER	MALE	14	13	26	22	23.5	18
	FEMALE	9.5	7.5	33.5	26.5	24	17
		*	*				
AGE	30	10	7	32	25	24.5	18
	30-40	12	11	27	25	24	16
	40+	10.5	11	28.5	20	22	19
RACE	BLACK	16	12	27	23	25	17
	WHITE	6	8	34	21	20	20
		*		*			*
SUPERVISOR	YES	7.5	8	27.5	26.5	26	17
	NO	12	10	32	21	23.5	18
					*		
*	Significant at at least 0.05 on Kruskal-Wallis Median Test						

In terms of black and white respondents, significant differences were recorded in terms of stability values, as well as system / interdependence values. White respondents attached much more value to stability and conformity and thus preferred stable, clearly defined jobs and a supervisor who told them what to do and maintained strict discipline. This result seems to indicate that black respondents are more comfortable with ambiguities and handle uncertainty better. A possible explanation for this finding could be the current employment situation in which white respondents find themselves. In an environment where people's jobs are threatened and where they feel insecure, stability and clearly defined responsibilities become very important. Clear and unambiguous rules are also needed - hence the importance of discipline and a supervisor who does not change his or her mind easily.

As far as system / interdependence values are concerned, black respondents attached less importance to self-actualisation, creativity and initiative than white respondents. This finding could possibly be explained in view of the fact that affirmative action only recently created career opportunities for black respondents. An appreciation of the more tangible elements of organisational success, such as money and status rather than self-actualisation, could thus be higher for these respondents.

The only statistically significant variance between supervisors and non-supervisors was in terms of material success values. This result indicates that supervisors attached more value to competition, risk taking and status, and that they tend to measure success in terms of material status symbols. They tend to thrive on competition and were prone to playing political games. This finding is consistent with the nature of a supervisor's responsibilities, which tends to expose the individual to competition and decision making, and which involves a certain amount of risk taking.

The different age groups did not record statistically significant variances with regard

to any of the six values measured by the Values Questionnaire. This finding seems to suggest that age variables do not impact strongly on individually held values.

Based on the results of the values research, it seems as though variance in values does not explain the variance with regard to the evaluation of the meanings ascribed to certain organisational constructs. The results of the Semantic Differential Scale, in contrast to the findings of the Values Questionnaire, point to significant variance in terms of age and race with regard to the evaluation of certain constructs such as affirmative action and transformation. This finding is contrary to theoretical assumptions that variance in terms of race, gender or age would lead to definite value differences. A possible explanation for this finding is that *"in modern corporate discourse systems there is at least an informal understanding that employees will leave their beliefs, whether political or religious, at home when they report to work"* (Scollon & Scollon, 1995:176). If employees comply to this organisational requirement, the lack of variance in terms of values can be explained by the fact that the questionnaires were completed at work and that the respondents answered the questions in their capacity as employees.

A further explanation for the lack of significant variance in values could be the process of institutionalisation and perpetuation of the corporate culture. The first step an organisation takes in perpetuating its culture is to ensure that its values are reflected in its recruitment policies and practices. It would therefore hold that people who display a belief in the organisation's values would stand a better chance of being employed than applicants who do not. Through the process of organisational selection and attrition, the organisation could attract and retain those individuals whose fundamental values are compatible with organisational values, resulting in less individual variance in values. Should this assumption be true, it would mean that organisational values are determined by factors other than the race, gender and age of its employees. This suggests that the individual's experience of the symbolic organisational context, or culture, is that determinant.

Semantic Differential Scale

The Semantic Differential Scale measured respondents' evaluation of five organisational concepts. The results indicate that affirmative action and / or the transformation process resulted in the most significant variance between groups of respondents. The biggest variance between groups of respondents was in terms of race, between black and white respondents. For results of analyses, see Appendix A: Tables 1 - 5 on pages 128 to 129).

Findings in terms of race

In the case of black versus white respondents, a high percentage of statistically significant variances were recorded in terms of the affirmative action and transformation constructs, although at least one significant variance was recorded for each of the other organisational constructs as well.

The finding that black and white respondents differed significantly with regard to the evaluation of the affirmative action construct, was consistent with the researchers expectations. Black respondents were significantly more positive in their evaluation of this construct. A notable exception was the perceived success of affirmative action. No variance was found among the different race groups, and both groups expressed a neutral stance on the success of the initiative.

A possible explanation for this finding relates to the nature of the implementation of affirmative action in South African organisations. The implementation of affirmative action in South African organisations is mostly target-driven and tends to create the perception that only a limited number of highly educated and skilled black people can benefit from it. White employees tend to feel threatened by the process, whilst black employees in the lower organisational ranks experience the process as beyond their reach. The success of affirmative action is thus questioned by both groups of respondents.

Although neither black nor white respondents were significantly negative in their evaluation of the transformation construct, black respondents were significantly more positive than their white counterparts on a number of dimensions.

This finding may be explained by a sense of alienation from the organisation, which is experienced by some white organisational members. For many of the white respondents the *good old days* are over, and they are struggling to come to terms with a new look organisation that demands of them new functional and interpersonal skills. An organisational initiative to change things further may therefore not be viewed positively. White organisational respondents may also experience more uncertainty with regard to their security of employment, which may result in less favourable perceptions of organisational change processes.

Findings in terms of age

In terms of the different age groups, affirmative action and the transformation process again resulted in the largest number of significant variances between groups. Age did not result in significant variance in the evaluation of the other organisational

constructs. An interesting finding is that the younger age group (younger than 30) displayed the most variance in their responses. Their responses tended towards the extremes of the bipolar scale. This group of respondents were especially positive in their evaluation of the transformation process and performance management, but evaluated affirmative action as the most negative. Respondents in the older age group (older than 40) were the most negative in their responses, and also the most negative in their evaluation of affirmative action and transformation. The middle age group (30 - 40 years old) generated the most neutral responses of the three groups. They were, however, marginally more negative in their evaluation of affirmative action and more positive towards performance management.

The variance in the responses of the different age groups may be explained by the fact that the younger group still displayed the optimism of youth and that they were not as prone to the political correctness demanded by the organisation of their older colleagues in the middle group. This allowed them to express their feelings and perceptions more honestly and freely. The younger age group was also better qualified than the other groups, which could also explain their more critical orientation. The older group of respondents (older than 40) seemed to display more cynicism than the other two groups. This is manifested in the negative evaluation of the transformation process - *"we have seen all this before - nothing new will come out of it"*. The fact that the older group was most negative about the organisational initiatives of affirmative action and transformation, seems to indicate them not perceiving a role for themselves in a changed organisation. The processes with which they were more familiar and probably more comfortable such as training and performance management, did not hold the same threat, hence the neutrality of responses. The neutrality of the responses with regard to these constructs may also indicate a sense of alienation from the organisation.

The 30 - 40 year old age group seems to be trapped in neutrality. This group of respondents seems to represent the faceless masses who do not have particularly strong opinions about their organisation, and who are reasonably satisfied as long as they receive their pay cheque and are not treated too badly. This age group has probably accumulated enough fringe benefits associated with years of service for them to feel that they will lose something should they have to leave the organisation now. Hence, the neutral responses *"not to make waves"*.

Findings in terms of gender

Gender variance in responses indicates that male and female respondents do not differ significantly. Male respondents were consistently more positive than female respondents in terms of all five concepts, although this difference was not statistically significant. This may be attributed to the fact that organisations tend toward paternalistic cultures

in which men are still unofficially regarded as *first among equals* and where women may still experience the sting of covert discrimination. This could also explain why female respondents did not evaluate affirmative action as positively as their male counterparts - they simply do not reap as many benefits from the process.

Findings in terms of organisational level

Variance in responses for supervisory versus non-supervisory levels differed from the other groups of respondents in that no significant differences were recorded for any of the affirmative action dimensions. In terms of all four the other concepts, however, at least one statistically significant variance was recorded for each concept. This represents a different pattern of responses to that of the other groups. Unlike the other groups of respondents, this group's responses varied most in terms of the Finesse project.

The responses from supervisors versus non-supervisory level employees were the most consistent in their differences. Supervisors were consistently more positive in their evaluation of the concepts that were measured by the Semantic Differential Scale. In most instances, the responses of supervisors were consistent with the evaluations of non-supervisors, but their responses were invariably more positive.

Organisational socialisation and role expectations seem to offer an explanation for this finding. Supervisors may feel that their position demands of them to react positively to whatever the organisation initiates, because criticism would be disloyal, hence the positive responses with regard to the Finesse Project. This view is supported by the fact that supervisors only evaluated four of the dimensions slightly negatively. Neutrality of response was absent in this group of respondents. These findings may indicate that supervisors feel the need to express approval of the organisation's actions, even though they may concur with the unfavourable evaluations held by the other groups of respondents.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings of the Semantic Differential Scale suggest that the different ways in which people ascribe meaning to the same event, object or behaviour are determined by organisational factors, in particular the organisational culture that exists. The Personal Values results revealed little variance in the personal values of the various groups' respondents. Respondents differed with regard to the meanings they ascribed to the different organisational constructs that were measured by the Semantic Differential Scale. Due to the insignificant variance in values between groups of respondents, variance in meaning cannot be ascribed to fundamental differences in value systems. This indicates that organisational experience may determine how people

ascribe meaning to events in an organisation, according to the principles of Symbolic Interactionism "*meanings arise in social contexts*" (Wood, 1982:68). If it is true that the social context, such as the culture of the organisation, leads to the social construction of meaning, variance in the evaluation of organisational constructs between groups of respondents are probably the result of different experiences in the organisational context. Because the different groups of respondents experience the same organisational culture differently, it leads to variance in the construction of symbolic meaning because of the difference in the social context within which the meaning is constructed.

The organisation that was used for this study, offers a relevant example of how an organisation distinguishes between employees - a distinction that has the potential of shaping individual construction of social meaning. The organisation under review inducts and socialises new employees, at different stages of their lives and career development, in different ways. Young recruits with diplomas or degrees attend a three-day organisational induction as well as a specific business unit induction programme. They are also regarded to be *in training* for a period of at least 18 months before they are appointed permanently. During the training period they spend time in different departments, and are exposed to the broader business context. A current initiative in the organisation is a focus on the development and retention of so called *young professionals* - a group defined as people younger than 30 with a formal tertiary education and an organisational career path.

Young recruits without tertiary qualifications are inducted in the same way, but do not undergo a training period and are thus not exposed to the broader organisational environment. Graduates are also more exposed to the organisation's leadership, hence their formal and informal socialisation could be expected to differ vastly from that of the non-graduates. The graduates-in-training are usually those earmarked for the leadership positions. This would also help to explain why the supervisory level respondents' responses were consistently different to those of the non-supervisors, and also more positive.

With the organisation investing so much time, resources and effort in its leaders of the future, it also ensures that the desired culture is maintained and perpetuated (Drennan, 1992: 5-28). Through the induction and development programmes, new recruits come into contact with the dominant leaders who have led the company to success and learn from them, thus being exposed to company tradition and history in a powerful way. These development programmes afford new recruits the opportunity to view the organisation's technology, products and services, as well as its competition and the broader industry, through the organisation's eyes, thus shaping future choices and perceptions. The company's expectations of its employees, as well as behaviour

that will be rewarded - either through awards or promotion - are overtly and covertly communicated.

By means of this relatively simple example it can be illustrated how individuals' organisational experiences can shape their processes of ascribing meaning. Furthermore, the way in which an organisation treats its employees is determined by its culture. Organisational culture should therefore be regarded as a significant factor in the diversity management process. Organisations may very well be insisting on treating employees, who basically subscribe to the same values and world-view, differently, based on the perception that they are different. Ironically enough, the differential treatment of groups of employees then results in different sense making processes which ultimately result in different behaviours, because "*human beings act toward phenomena on the basis of the meanings they attach to the phenomena*" (Wood, 1982:67). Organisations could thus be guilty of instituting self-fulfilling prophecies, especially in terms of organisational members from different racial backgrounds.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHEMATA MODEL

The aim of the empirical research was to test the validity of the Schemata Model of Interpersonal Communication in the Organisational Context. One of the most important findings of the individual level results was the confirmation of the importance of the context within which human beings interact. The organisation under review is a major player in the South African economy and as a parastatal, it cannot escape becoming a political play-ball at times. The external pressures and influences have a decisive impact on how the organisation's leadership makes internal business decisions. The internal business decisions to a large extent determine the distribution and use of power in the organisation, based on its ideology. Organisational culture and the kind of discourse the organisation engages in, are also significantly influenced by external factors. Both the external environmental and internal organisational factors then co-operate to determine the context for interpersonal interaction within the organisation.

The Schemata Model for Interpersonal Communication in the Organisational Contexts proposes that individuals react to each other based on the idea (schemata) they have of each other. People therefore do not communicate with each other directly, but rather with the mental image they have of the other person. Different factors are believed to influence the process of constructing schemata as well as the subsequent processes of sense making and the sharing of meaning. The different ways in which people respond to these factors, such as socialisation and culture, are related to the fundamental differences of their world-views. The results of the interpersonal level research however, suggest that this assumption cannot be made.

Black and white respondents who did not display a large variance in personal values, recorded a relatively high degree of variance in the evaluation of organisational meaning. Elements in organisational life magnify race as a function of organisational diversity. The fact that organisational level, supervisory or not, produced the second highest significant variances in responses is a further indicator that organisational experience may be a key determinant of the way in which people ascribe meaning. It can therefore be expected that the sociolinguistic phenomenon of intergroup biases would be strongly influenced by the way in which groups of individuals are treated by their organisation, and not necessarily by the more generally accepted diversity issues such as race, gender and age. Support for this assumption may be found in organisations where black people are appointed in managerial positions and find that the organisation looks different from the other side of the polished desk, and that it is easier to understand tough decisions once you have a more complete point of view. The same goes however, for managers who take the time to expose themselves to the life of an ordinary employee.

The above examples serve to illustrate how a person's position and experiences in the organisation have the ability to influence the filters through which meaning is filtered in the encoding and decoding processes, as well as the schemata employed during communication. In organisational life, the in-group does not necessarily consist of those who look like you and come from the same background. The in-group is more likely to be those who share the same organisational experiences.

Due to the political and social history of South Africa, in most cases groups who share the same organisational experiences also share similar backgrounds. Until recently white men coming from superior education and social backgrounds, most often found themselves in powerful organisational positions. Despite often sharing the same social and educational privileges, white women experienced discrimination and limited opportunities in their organisational career paths. Black employees, on the other hand, usually found themselves in the lowest organisational ranks and were ill equipped to be considered for advancement due to inferior education and/or severe discrimination. Based on their positions and experiences in the same hypothetical organisation, it can be suggested that the white men would generally have been satisfied and loyal employees, thinking highly of their employer. White women by and large might also not have been too unhappy and would not have felt a great need for things to change. The black workforce however, would have been very dissatisfied and would have proven to be fertile soil for resentment and mass action.

In terms of interpersonal communication and the sharing of meaning between members of these different groups, it could be expected that the process would be impeded by the schemata each individual held of the other, based on his or her position and associated status in the organisation. Individuals' self images in organisational

communication transactions would also have been influenced by the power they perceived themselves to wield in relation to the other person, as well as the way in which they had been socialised in the organisation. These schemata would have been instrumental in decisions pertaining to, for example, choice of subject and choice of words, and would have been a deciding factor in the process of decoding the other person's response. The way in which the organisation treated each of these highly simplified groups of individuals would significantly influence their schemata of themselves and of other employees, thus impacting on relations in the workplace.

The political and social transformation process in South Africa is forcing organisations to do away with outdated practices and thereby forcing changes to their cultures in order to accommodate a growing workforce diversity.. Based on the results of this study, these cultural changes ought to be driven by the fact that employees respond to the way in which the organisation treats them, thus accordingly constructing their social reality and their schemata for interpersonal communication in the workplace .

The way in which an individual experiences his or her organisation is by and large a function of the organisational culture - the way things are done around here. Organisational culture determines socialisation, power relationships, policies and procedures, reward systems, discourse systems and ideology, all of which have a significant impact on the day to day experiences of all employees. Affirmative action is one of the main channels through which diversity is injected into the decision making levels of South African organisations. But, as long as the way in which an organisation conducts its business does not change in accordance with its workforce demographics, affirmative action targets will elude organisations for years to come. The organisation's culture has to change in order to make allowance for people who need to be treated as individuals - not members of a uniform group. The introduction of diversity places new demands and challenges before the existing workforce and organisational cultures should provide for these.

The results of the interpersonal level analyses do not indicate that factors such as values, beliefs, attitudes and socialisation within a specific community and culture are of no importance with regard to diversity management. These factors cannot be disregarded. The results do however emphasise the importance of the organisational culture as context for the creation of interpersonal meaning. As a result of many variables such as tertiary education, recruitment and attrition, policies and procedures, and organisational socialisation, an organisation's workforce in all probability never truly reflects broader society on a psychological level. Therefore, diversity of a workforce has to be managed through changing the organisational system and modifying the core culture. Koopman (1991:6) believes that this is a lengthy process which is spurred by full and real participation in the structuring of explicit values and principles. Only

once all values and beliefs are coherent to all members of the organisation can further changes be addressed.

The Schemata Model for Interpersonal Communication in Organisational Contexts suggests that the communicating individuals' positions in, and experiences of the organisation, significantly influence their schemata. The consequence of this dynamic is that organisational diversity management cannot succeed if individuals' experiences of their organisation's culture is not taken into account.

In the South African context the management of meaning provides a means of facilitating integration and reconciliation within culturally diverse organisations.

APPENDIX A

Table 1: Affirmative Action

		Respondent			
		Male / Female	-30 / 30-40 / 40+	Black / White	Supervisor / Not
Affirmative Action	Fair			*	
Affirmative Action	Necessary			*	
Affirmative Action	Fast	*	*	*	
Affirmative Action	Voluntary	*	*	*	
Affirmative Action	People-driven	*	*	*	
Affirmative Action	Successful				
Affirmative Action	Opportunity			*	
Affirmative Action	All Benefit			*	
Affirmative Action	Career opportunities		*	*	
Affirmative Action	Inspires			*	
Affirmative Action	Cost effective	*	*	*	
Affirmative Action	Empowers	*		*	
Affirmative Action	No reversed racism		*	*	

* Significant at least at 0.05 level on Kruskal-Wallis median test

Table 2: Transformation

		Respondent			
		Male / Female	-30 / 30-40 / 40+	Black / White	Supervisor / Not
Transformation	Improvement		*	*	*
Transformation	Necessary		*	*	*
Transformation	Fast			*	
Transformation	Money well spent				*
Transformation	Things different				
Transformation	Good faith		*	*	
Transformation	Opportunity		*	*	*
Transformation	We are involved			*	
Transformation	Career opportunities		*	*	
Transformation	Inspires		*	*	
Transformation	Transparent				*
Transformation	Influence decisions				*

* Significant at least at 0.05 level on Kruskal-Wallis median test

Table 3: Finesse Project

		Respondent			
		Male / Female	-30 / 30-40 / 40+	Black / White	Supervisor / Not
Finesse Project	Improvement		*		*
Finesse Project	Necessary				
Finesse Project	Fast				
Finesse Project	Money well spent				*
Finesse Project	Things different				
Finesse Project	Easier Work				
Finesse Project	Opportunity		*		*
Finesse Project	We are involved				
Finesse Project	Will be a success				*
Finesse Project	Good idea			*	*
Finesse Project	Time well spent				*
Finesse Project	Future investment				*
Finesse Project	Based on user needs				*

* Significant at least at 0.05 level on Kruskal-Wallis median test

Table 4: Performance Management

		Respondent			
		Male / Female	-30 / 30-40 / 40+	Black / White	Supervisor / Not
Performance management	Objective				
Performance management	Fair				
Performance management	Reward good performance			*	
Performance management	Motivates				
Performance management	Necessary			*	*
Performance management	Easy to understand				
Performance management	Does not scare me		*	*	*
Performance management	I have a say				
Performance management	Consistent		*		
Performance management	I have confidence in it				
Performance management	Time well spent				*

* Significant at least at 0.05 level on Kruskal-Wallis median test

Table 5: Training Opportunities

		Respondent			
		Male / Female	-30 / 30-40 / 40+	Black / White	Supervisor / Not
Training opportunities	More for employees				
Training opportunities	Based on employees needs				*
Training opportunities	Based on business needs			*	
Training opportunities	Motivates			*	
Training opportunities	Necessary	*		*	
Training opportunities	More for Blacks				
Training opportunities	Personal development		*		
Training opportunities	Is easily accessible				
Training opportunities	Is more for men				
Training opportunities	For the younger				
Training opportunities	Time well spent				

* Significant at least at 0.05 level on Kruskal-Wallis median test

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