Claude-Hélène Mayer: **The Meaning of Sense of Coherence in Transcultural Management: A Salutogenic Perspective on Interactions in a Selected South African Business Organisation**

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> *… the nutritious pemmican on which scholars love to chew.*
>
> Robertson Davies (1995, p. 187).

Researchers on the sense of coherence, transcultural management, and even management in general, will find much in this book that is most worthwhile – but be prepared for some hard work. True to its physical format of just over 400 pages, this is in large part a highly informative work. Just the king's ransom of 55 pages of references makes it a required resource where research is considered or being done in these and related areas. There are German and British references, the usual predominance of American references, and an impressive collection of South African ones. Yet, it is not a book without problems. In terms of presentation, I found it slow reading, due to a style of sentences loaded with information, and constantly concluded with references, often several at a time (but which I frequently wanted to look up, and often marked). There is also much redundancy in the presentation.

Contents

The first four chapters present the theoretical backbone of the project – extensively. It contains the theoretical aspects and methodology of the research. The bibliography is brought to bear here. This portion of the book could serve as a model for doctoral students or a team of researchers on organisational behaviour, management, and even sociology or anthropology of organisations (although perhaps in the way of the cock who took the hens to an ostrich egg – to show them what could be done).

A general orientation is presented in Chapter 1. Research questions are presented in great detail, as is the research design: a phenomenological (hermeneutic) approach, using a single case study, employing quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (in-depth interviews, observations and field notes) research methods. The research problem is stated: "… to contribute to a new and complex understanding of salutogenesis interlinked with selected issues in diverse organisational contexts" (p. 25). This is most welcome, as much of the existing literature covers problems of individual psychological functioning in sickness and health. A secondary goal was to develop a model for organisational intervention along salutogenic lines. The fact that the study was done in (South) Africa, makes it a valuable contribution to a field usually explored in the northern hemisphere. It allowed, too, for a diverse sample of participants. In terms of application, the hope is expressed that managers could use the data and findings to improve their understanding of their complex work situation. For this to happen, a greatly condensed and pre-digested version would be required.

The context of the research is presented in Chapter 2: the automotive industry, the current financial crisis, transcultural management challenges in South Africa (including affirmative action and Black economic empowerment), and a discussion of the chosen organisation in Europe and in South Africa.

Paradigms of health research, in particular the salutogenic/fortigenic paradigm form the contents of Chapter 3. Antonovsky (1979, 1987) sought to unravel "the mystery of health" and to find answers to the question how people manage stress and stay well; he coined the term "salutogenesis" (origins of health). One of his central constructs in his model is the "sense of coherence" (SOC) and he developed a questionnaire to measure it – one of the measures used in Mayer's study. Fortigenesis" is Strümpfer's (1995) extension of Antonovsky's construct, to describe the origins of strength at other endpoint too, including work. The present work contains an extensive section on Antonovsky's theoretical approach and the sense of coherence, as well as a review of research literature, including South African studies. It also contains a brief but important section on criticism of his views. Even a reader with a good background on these matters would find this review creditable and useful.

Selected aspects of transcultural management, mainly with a salutogenic slant are the matter of Chapter 4. Topics covered in depth are aspects such as competencies, conflict management, systemic approaches, managerial training, counselling, consulting, coaching, mentoring, and mediation. Readers with organisational behaviour and management perspectives would find these worth reading.

The remaining chapters cover the empirical work of the project. Chapter 5 starts with a concept-laden section on the research paradigm and research approach (with enough references to send a reader on an extensive library search). The chapter presents the design and methodology of the project in a most thorough way, covering topics such as quantitative and qualitative research, the case study approach, triangulation and "crystalisation", reliability (as dependability), validation (as generalizability and transferability), and objectivity (as confirmability). Ethical guidelines applied in the study are spelled out. Methodological limitations are indicated: a single case study based on a relatively small set of data.

The empirical work took place in an unidentified international automotive organisation in South Africa, with a German holding company. "The company operates internationally and belongs to one of Europe's leading German engineering groups" (p. 135). Reasons are presented why this particular organisation was chosen for the study. Entrée and establishing the researcher's roles are spelled out.

The rest of Chapter 5 presents information on the three paper-and-pencil measures that were used [Antonovsky's (1987) Orientation to Life Questionnaire, Schwartz's (1992) Value Survey, and the multi-authored Organisational Culture Profile (Sarros et al., 2002, version)] and the individual, in-depth interview procedure, as well as collateral talks and observations. Only descriptive statistics were used to present the quantitative data. Qualitative data were analysed extensively in a five-step process (pp. 154-158).

Questionnaire responses were presented in copious bar graphs and tables in Chapter 6. The author noted that Black managers achieved the highest SOC scores, whereas Indian and White scores were spread widely (pp. 196-197). On the Schwartz Value Survey the sample scored high on Universalism, Benevolence and Security; Black managers again scored on average highest across most of the value domains (p. 197). Black and female groups (minority groups) scored highest in total scores on the

Organisational Culture Profile, thus presenting a more positive attitude towards the organisational culture than Indian and White managers (p. 197).

Four selected managers (one Coloured and two Indian, all three female, and one Black male) agreed to comment in detail on the findings, as well as to self-reflect on their personal responses and findings. (One could well wonder on what grounds they were selected, seeing that all four were from minority groups.) Extensive comments and verbatim responses from them are presented. Impressionistic comments on the findings conclude Chapter 6.

The most time-consuming part of the study is presented in Chapter 7: the findings from individual, in-depth interviews with all participants; 112 pages were required to do that.

Looking back

Author's comments

In the end, the author viewed this as an exploratory study. She commented that the qualitative study is subject to methodological limitations, being a single case study on a small set of data. "The data were not necessarily generalisable and follow-up studies are required to prove the findings in similar and different organisational and national contexts" (p. 392). (My only comment would be that the results are *not at all* generalizable.) She acknowledged that the research was not committed to fulfil the criteria of statistical reliability and validity – instead, it did refer to qualitative quality criteria. Furthermore, the study only captured subjective data and only emic perspectives. She remarked on the fact that the study was conducted by a single researcher, and noted her awareness of the fact that her personal bias and idiosyncrasies may be reflected in the analysis and evaluation of the data. "Direct communication between the researcher and the manager could also be limited by personal characteristics of the researcher (age, gender, personal appearance), thereby influencing the manager's answers and the interviewer's communication techniques (e.g. question phrasing, tone of voice)" (p. 393). The categorisation in content analysis may have been biased by the single researcher and this could have had an effect of the findings.

Such a sure-footed *mea culpa*-statement should be held up as an example in teaching research methods. (After that, one almost hesitates to express criticism.)

Voluntarism

The author set high value on participants' volunteering to participate in the research. One could, however, wonder what the effect of volunteering was on the nature of the sample. Would there not have been systematic difference between the sample and the refusers? The author referred to the descriptive German term: *Untersuchungsgegenstand* (resistance to being examined). What could be psychological, social and organisational factors in experiencing such *Gegenstand*? Would these factors be absent in the case of the volunteers, and/or might there be other variables that motivated them positively? There are extensive indications of particular characteristics in the case of volunteering for psychological experiments, mainly in fairly old literature.

One could consider the possibility of using the volunteer participants as recruiters for additional participants. On the basis of their own experiences, such persons could

inform, reassure and convince colleagues to participate. Without exerting undue pressure, senior managers could possibly encourage subordinates in terms of the value of the research to the company. Lastly, a researcher could become a familiar enough figure to be able to invite more participation. Whilst such efforts would negate the purity of voluntarism, it should be weighed up against the problems of a minimal sample and volunteer characteristics.

Quality of data

At the time of the interviews, 184 persons were employed at the organisation's headquarters in Johannesburg. Of the 101 who were identified as managers, 27 volunteered. This "natural sampling" (p. 138) was where the study faltered.

Fifteen females and 12 males constituted the sample. The distribution of female participants was: 2 supervision, 7 in lower management, 4 in middle management and 2 in top management; for males it was: 2 in lower management, 4 in middle management and 6 in top management. Four interviewees identified themselves as Black, one as Coloured (mixed descent), three as (South African) Indian, and 19 as White. There was diversity in terms of nationality: Bulgarian 1, Dutch 1, German 4, Coloured 1, Indian 3, African 4 (with different home languages), and White South African 13 (8 Afrikaans-speakers) . The sample is throughout referred to as "managers", implying greater homogeneity than actually existed. The disparities mean that statistically the data are meaningless. Qualitative studies typically have small samples, but enough homogeneity is usually expected to allow conclusions. It could, however, be argued that when the phenomenon under study is well known to all participants (as in this case) diversity could enrich the obtained data. If the purpose is to explore the complexity of the problems as experienced by individuals, this seems to be a way to go.

Management point of view

With the management of transcultural conflict a central concern, a worrisome piece of information is presented at the end of Chapter 7. "Altogether 17 of the 27 managers denied having ever experienced conflict" (p. 241). It relates to a general statement that: "[I]t becomes obvious that transcultural conflicts are still a taboo topic for most interviewees" (p. 224). Just *ten* participants' reactions and information on conflict were available as data concerning questions about, for instance, how managers actually manage transcultural conflict, or how managers experience their health in relation to such conflict (pp. 243-245).

To know that a small number of participants, e.g., two, three, even seven, presented something similar or described the same strategy, is not informative as a basis for intervention planning, nor for top management decision making. Some generalisations are presented in terms of majority statements. Three examples:

"[F]eeling energetic and empowered are linked to physical, mental and spiritual well-being of male and female managers" (p. 210).

"[T]he managers' well-being was very much related to each person's identity, values and biography" (p. 214).

"Conflictual frictions were evident across the racial, communicative, gender and international lines and were, therefore, complex in its occurrence and management" (p. 242).

The author was well aware of such problems. She stated clearly: "These implications are bound to the data set and do not claim to be generalisations with regard to other contexts" (p. 366). (Unfortunately, she did not maintain such objectivity consistently.)

As a conclusion, she proposed some remedies (p. 394). Firstly, future research should be conducted across different business organizations. It could gain more depth by focussing on fewer issues at a time, instead of linking several aspects at once. More diverse data should be obtained than those from questionnaires and interviews, through analyses of concrete management situations and transcultural conflicts, based upon, e.g., sound recordings or videos. Physical health could be assessed through physiological measures. "Future studies should be more dimensional and integrative" (p. 394). The use of multiple case studies and comparing findings is recommended, so as to allow for generalisation. A larger sample would be required to allow statistical analyses, so as to fulfil the criteria of statistical reliability and validity. These are highly important in management contexts, "which are still based on statistical thought styles and numbers, rather than qualitative statements and individual opinions".

There is an anecdote that, after listening to a presentation by a group of historians, President Lyndon Johnson asked: "Therefore what?" Would senior management in the organisation concerned not look on this project and legitimately ask the same question? A practical outcome could be seen in the intervention programme proposed (pp. 373-391) but it does not clearly flow from the research report. It needs to be motivated and presented on stronger grounds.

Conclusion

Despite ambiguity, this is a book that ought to be available in any university or research institute where work is done on the topics indicated above.

One can only wish Prof. Mayer well on the vast project she has begun to delve into – to the benefit of members at all levels of the numerous transcultural organizations that exist in a world where no isolation is possible anymore. She has made a courageous start.

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