Some tentative comments on the black manager in a white world

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This paper argues that, with respect to the black manager in a white world, our theories, methodologies and research programmes have tended to concentrate on behaviour and frequency at the expense of experience and meaning, with the result that we may have failed to isolate some of the reasons for the underperformance of some black managers within white organizations. Investigation of both behaviour and experience suggests that underperformance may be associated as much with the marginal position of the black manager as with culture, education and discrimination. Therefore — apart from solutions to the problems associated with blatant or obtrusive cultural differences (such as language), apart from the problems associated with an educational system grossly inferior to that of Whites and apart from solutions to problems associated with discrimination — solutions must also be found to the problems associated with the peculiar situation in which the black manager finds himself. In other words, an attempt must be made to reduce the inconsistencies, ambiguities and conflicts with which black managers are faced. Some potential solutions to the problems confronted by black managers are suggested.

S. Afr. J. Bus. Mgmt. 1981, 12: 103 – 108

In dié artikel word aangevoer dat, wat die swart bestuurder in 'n wit wêreld betref, ons teorieë, metodologieë en navorsingsprogramme geneig was om te konsentreer op gedrag en frekwensie ten koste van ervaring en betekenis. Dié benadering mag veroorsaak het dat ons sommige van die redes vir die onderprestasie van sommige swart bestuurders binne blanke organisasies, nie behoorlik geïsoleer het nie. Ondersoek van sowel gedrag as ervaring dui aan dat onderprestasie in net so 'n groot mate met die marginale posisie van die swart bestuurder mag verband hou, as met kultuur, opleiding en diskriminasie. Dus — naas oplossings vir die probleme wat verband hou met blatante of opvallende kultuurverskille (soos taal), naas probleme met 'n onderwysstelsel wat merkbaar minderwaardig is teenoor dié van Blankes en naas oplossings vir probleme wat met diskriminasie verband hou — moet oplossings ook gevind word vir die probleme wat te doen het met die besondere situasie waarin die swart bestuurder hom bevind. Met ander woorde, 'n poging moet aangewend word om die teenstrydighede, dubbelsinnighede en konflikte waarteenoor die swart bestuurder te staan kom, te verminder. Sommige potensiële oplossings vir die probleme wat swart bestuurders moet konfronteer, word voorgestel.

S.-Afr. Tydskr. Bedryfsl. 1981, 12: 103 – 108

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All uncertainty is fruitful . . . so long as it is accompanied by the wish to understand.
Antonio Machado, Juan de Mairena
1943, 43, tr. Ben Belitt

Introduction

The increasing pressure from international companies for the institutionalization of equal job opportunities for all, the recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission and, more recently, the almost outspoken commitment of the Minister of Manpower Utilization to the training and full utilization of manpower irrespective of race, colour, sex or creed, all herald a more realistic approach, brought about by economic necessity, to labour relations in South Africa. Although on a social, political and educational level the interaction between Whites and Blacks remains severely circumscribed, on an economic level it would appear that black people are about to achieve a level of assimilation greater than at any other point during this century.

The increasing acceptance of black managers into an erstwhile almost white world has led to attention being given to the problems such managers encounter. Moreover, training programmes, frequently based on research, have often been instituted for the amelioration thereof.[1] However, it is suggested below that our theories, our methodologies and our research projects (and to some extent our training programmes and management practices) have tended to concentrate on behaviour at the expense of experience with the result that many of the problems faced by black managers in the work situation may have been simplistically construed and perhaps even exacerbated.

This paper attempts to briefly examine the way in which our theories, methodologies and research are constituted, to investigate the problems faced by the black manager from an alternative viewpoint, and then to suggest further solutions to the problems with which he is faced. Obviously, any attempt to cover so much ground in so few pages implies that much will be left unsaid and much will be left open to debate. Moreover, much of what is said is no more than tentative and hesitant. The sole purpose of this paper is to generate ideas on and to encourage reconsideration of a topic with respect to

Theory, method and research

Without going deeply into this vast and complex field, and without any pretence of knowing or understanding all of the many and complex arguments involved, it appears that it is now generally held that there is not only a vital link between theory and method in the social sciences but also that these in turn are linked to the particular world view to which the researcher subscribes.[2,3] In much of the research undertaken in the field of management and organization theory, the ontological positions and views of human nature expressed by many researchers could be subsumed under the broad heading of 'positivism'.[4] In other words, reality is regarded as being found in the concrete behaviour and relationships between the parts of which the social world, as an objective phenomenon whose parts are measurable, is composed. Generally, questionable status is attributed to any part of that world which does not manifest itself in some form of concrete, observable behaviour. The social world is regarded as similar to the natural world; it is concrete, external and measurable. Human beings are, moreover, often regarded as a product of the external forces in the environment to which they are exposed; they are seen as behaving and responding to events in predictable and determinate ways as a result of the stimuli in their environment that condition them.[3, p.495] This world view and the theories based thereon are, moreover, Western in both origin and outlook; they take little or no cognizance of ontological positions or views of human nature originating elsewhere.

Although obviously ideal-typical and vastly oversimplified, such a world view and the theories based thereon are the foundations upon which 'quantitative' or 'scientific' research methodologies are frequently based. The findings of such 'scientific' research projects may subsequently be employed for the development of training programmes and to substantiate certain managerial practices.

However, the positivistic perspective emphasizes behaviour at the expense of experience. Positivism, like natural science, is concerned with behaviour. The only experience this orientation concerns itself with is the observer's (or the researcher's) experience of the subject; to all intents and purposes, it ignores the subject's experience of his or her world. However, by ignoring the subject's experience, positivists are often forced to impute their own meanings and reasons into the subject's behaviour; they rarely investigate both the behaviour and the experience of their subjects, which would give them insight into their behaviour by means of the experiences they are undergoing. Moreover, having examined the subject's behaviour and having come to some consensus on their own interpretation of why he or she behaves the way he/she does, they often go on to develop ameliorative action plans with respect to the observed behaviour which may or may not be consistent with what the individual is feeling or experiencing or the reason for that behaviour.

By way of contrast, the most basic idea of all phenomenologists and existentialists is to maintain the integrity of the phenomenon. The world of experience is always treated as *the* reality.[5, p.296; 6, 7] Laing,[8, p.102] for example, states '. . . I shall write *entirely* about a sequence of ex-

perience. I shall therefore have to use the language of experience. So many people feel they have to translate "subjective" events into "objective" terms in order to be scientific. To be genuinely scientific means having valid knowledge of a chosen domain of reality'. May[9, p.76] also argues that 'one of the chief (if not *the* chief) blocks to the understanding of human beings in Western culture is precisely the over-emphasis on technique, an over-emphasis which goes along with the tendency to see the human being as an object to be calculated, managed, "analyzed"' before he is even understood. The tendency has been for researchers to believe that understanding follows technique, but the existentialists argue exactly the opposite; that is, that technique follows understanding. The existentialists regard the understanding of the individual as a being and as a being-in-his-world as their fundamental task. Without this initial understanding, technical problems are at best irrelevant, at worst a method of 'structuralizing'.[9, p.77] The existentialists would appear not to argue, as Husserl did, for a presuppositionless knowledge and the existentialists[5, p.296] admit that everyone, including the researcher, is affected by his or her own ideology. 'The crucial point is simply that, insofar as possible, we participate directly in social experience and develop our understanding of that experience, including the methods of knowing and analyzing it, in accord with the demands of that experience, in the way that seems best to allow us to maintain the properties of that experience.'[5, p.297] In essence, 'Social phenomenology is the science of my own and of others' *experience*. It is concerned with the relation between my experience of you and your experience of me. That is, with *inter-experience*. It is concerned with your behaviour and my behaviour *as I experience it*, and your behaviour and my behaviour *as you experience it*. Since your and their experience is invisible to me, as mine is to you and them, I seek to make evident to the others, through their experience of my behaviour, what I infer of your experience, through my experience of your behaviour'.[8, pp.16-17]

Existentialists tend to concentrate on 'qualitative' research methods such as personal research experience and in-depth involvement in the daily lives of their subjects. Some may, however, over-emphasize experience at the expense of observed behaviour and often findings are non-generalizable beyond the particular individuals under study.[10]

Without going further into the positivism versus existentialism-phenomenology debate and without wishing to make out a stronger case for the former or the latter perspective, it would appear that positivism and phenomenology, quantitative and qualitative, behaviour and experience, are not mutually exclusive and that one must rather think in terms of one supplementing the other. As Laing[8, p.43] states, 'Just as any theory that focuses on *experience* and neglects behaviour can become very misleading, so theories that focus on behaviour to the neglect of experience become unbalanced'. One is essentially arguing, with respect to the black manager in a white world, that at present we tend to neglect experience and to concentrate on behaviour with the result that our research projects and training programmes based thereon only partially investigate and meet the problems the black

manager encounters. To emphasize or illustrate this point, let us look briefly at the black manager in a white world in terms of both his experience and his behaviour in order to determine if an analysis of his experience (in conjunction with an analysis of his behaviour) affects the way in which we construe his problems, the causes of his problems and his needs. This discussion is based on references to the literature (the majority of which concentrated on behaviour) and in-depth and group discussions with a number of black managers and potential black managers.[1] Although these interviews largely concentrated on experience and although no argument can be put forward for the findings of qualitative research of this kind being either generalizable beyond the response group or statistically reliable, on a common sense level the argument presented appears to make sense. The sole purpose of this tentative discussion is to attempt to link the experiences and the behaviour of the black manager in a white world with a view to the identification of areas in which ameliorative action might be taken.

The black manager in a white world

The behaviour of the black manager in the work situation in South Africa would appear to be reasonably well documented. Hofmeyr,[11] for example, in his interviews with senior (white) line management, first-line (white) managers and potential black managers found, *inter alia*, that black managers are generally regarded as finding leadership, responsibility and autonomy problematic. They tend to be subservient, to experience problems in communicating clearly, to be insufficiently at ease with business concepts, to generate some customer resistance, to be affiliation-oriented and to lack interpersonal skills. Similarly, Nasser[12] suggests that the performance (or the behaviour) of the black manager is exacerbated by an inability to function autonomously and to handle increased responsibility, a lack of assertiveness, a tardiness in decision-making, a low propensity for risk-taking, a lack of innovation and creativity and, finally, a lack of initiative in resolving problems.

Research in both South Africa and the USA has tended to attribute an almost pervasive underperformance among black managers to three main sets of factors, namely cultural factors, lack of qualifications or educational factors, and racial discrimination.[11] These factors are, however, employed in arguments which attempt to explain the behaviour (or the performance) of the black manager; almost no attempts have been made to understand and explain the experiences which the black manager undergoes in the work situation.

Without wishing to deny the obvious import of culture, education and discrimination as factors in the underperformance of black managers, it would appear that, if we look briefly at the experiences of the black manager in a white world, a fourth set of factors comes into play. These factors are associated with the ambiguities, conflicts and inconsistencies with which the black manager is confronted and may play an important role in his underperformance in the work situation. Let us briefly follow this argument through:

Elsewhere, I have argued that the black manager is 'marginal'.[1, 13] In other words, he is expected to function in possibly three different worlds. Firstly, he is expected

to function in the world of the black township and black urban culture. Secondly, he is expected to function as a Non-white in apartheid society. Thirdly, he has to contend with the work situation where he may be expected to function as an equal with his white colleagues. As urban black culture would appear to constitute an indefinite, twilight culture which is precariously balanced in a no man's land between traditional and Western culture, and as the black manager's position in the work situation (where he is regarded as an equal of his white colleague) is inconsistent with his position in apartheid society, there is small wonder that he is confused and that his performance in the work situation may suffer as a result. Indeed, in view of the inconsistencies, conflicts and ambiguities thrown up by involvement in these three diverse, conflicting and ambiguous environments, it is hardly surprising that all of the black managers interviewed described what could be called an inner strain or malaise with respect to their work situation. Many said that, in the work situation, they feel as though they 'do not belong'. The general feeling was that black managers are living a schizophrenic existence: they are living in a no man's land between two cultural groups; they are partially accepted and partially rejected by the white world in which they are expected to perform; they face the psychological burden of not knowing 'where they stand'; they cannot take the knowledge they require for practical competence in routine performance for granted. The world of the black manager is rife with inconsistencies on the socio-political and cultural level which in turn are exacerbated by an attempt at integration in the work setting. Thus, on top of cultural inconsistencies, conflicts and ambiguities and on top of being classified as a Non-white for the greater part of the time, the black manager is expected to function as a White in a white world during his working day. This is in spite of the fact that he may have had little previous exposure to white informal networks, in spite of the fact that he may confront tokenism in the work setting; in spite of the fact that he may receive inadequate exposure and consultation; unequal remuneration; hostility from the shop-floor; a top-management policy of non-discrimination but discrimination at lower-management levels; unwilling secretaries; poorer promotion opportunities; little forward career planning; discrimination on a social level and encouragement to be individualistic while at the same time being constantly reminded of his ethnic background.

The experiences of the black manager in a white world evade adequate description unlike behaviour or performance which can be both quantified and assessed. Lack of clarity and quantification should not, however, be regarded as an excuse for dismissal. The marginal experience of the black manager is real and, in some instances, acute. Thus Jones,[14] describing his experiences of 'What it's like to be a black manager' in the USA, which professes a philosophy of racial integration in all spheres of life, puts forward an argument very similar to those put forward by the black managers interviewed in South Africa. Jones's experiences highlight a phenomenon — the marginal situation — which he himself admits he did not understand at the time.[14, p.113] Jones was a black man in a unique position in a white company; he was anxious because of internal conflicts and confused because of ex-

ternal inconsistencies.[14] His lack of previous exposure to white informal networks, his own need to 'prove' himself, organizational inconsistencies, cultural differences and above, and including all, his marginal position affected his performance. According to Jones,[14, p.116] the net effect of his experiences is, moreover, similar to that of other black people with whom he has discussed the matter.

From these findings, it would appear that the problems faced by the black manager are not unique to South Africa but are rather generalizable to anyone with a black skin who attempts to function in an erstwhile white world. Such problems result moreover not only from cultural, educational and discriminatory factors, but also from the peculiar situation — the marginal situation — in which the black manager finds himself. The black manager who is faced with a wholly discriminatory system is not marginal; he knows precisely 'where he stands'. It is the black manager who is in certain ways rejected or discriminated against and at the same time and in certain other spheres accepted as an equal who confronts problems of a marginal nature. Thus, even in the USA, a history of racial discrimination and the reaction of certain individuals towards a black skin, together with a lack of previous exposure to a specifically white informal network, put Jones in a position in which he could not take his work-world for granted; he was never quite sure of how particular individuals were going to react to him and he could never quite dismiss the fact that he was black from his mind. The implications of the marginal situation could be construed as suggesting that black people should be employed by companies which employ only black people and which are owned and run by Blacks. This is undoubtedly one solution. However, humaneness and economic reality suggest the diametrically opposed solution. In order for South Africa to function viably and peacefully, we must examine the effects the marginal situation has on black managers and attempt to find solutions to their dilemma. Our task is to reduce the conflicts, inconsistencies and ambiguities with which black managers are faced in order that their performance in the work situation might not only improve, but also be meaningful to them. Initially, however, let us examine the effects the marginal situation may have on the performance of the black manager:

The inconsistencies, ambiguities and conflicts confronted by the black manager would appear to leave him doubtful of where his loyalties lie. They also create a level of strain and sensitivity which, it is acknowledged, may vary from individual to individual. The cumulative effects of the marginal situation may, however, affect the performance of the black manager in the work situation. In other words, underperformance, a lack of assertiveness or self-assertion, affiliative tendencies, tension, dissatisfaction and the like, *may* not *only* result from cultural factors, an inferior education system and discrimination, but also from the inconsistencies, ambiguities and conflict with which black managers are faced. Although research in this area is needed, literature pertaining to role conflict and role ambiguity, concepts which may well be related in some way to marginality, suggest that ambiguity and conflict may well cause lower productivity, tension, dissatisfaction and psychological

withdrawal from the work group.[15, 16, p.101] It would thus appear that the marginal situation may be the partial cause of problems previously associated with culture, education and discrimination and that our failure to recognize its importance may go some way towards explaining a persistently unsatisfactory level of performance amongst some black managers. If this is the case, then we must commence the search for ways in which inconsistencies, ambiguities and conflicts can be reduced. It is to the suggestion of a number of ameliorative action plans that this paper now turns.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that, with respect to the black manager in a white world, our theories, methodologies and research programmes have tended to concentrate on behaviour and frequency at the expense of experience and meaning with the result that we may have failed to isolate some of the reasons for the underperformance of some black managers within white organizations. Investigation of both behaviour and experience suggests that underperformance may be associated as much with the marginal position of the black manager as with culture, education and discrimination. Therefore, apart from solutions to the problems associated with blatant or obtrusive cultural differences (such as language), apart from the problems associated with an educational system grossly inferior to that of Whites and apart from solutions to problems associated with discrimination, solutions must also be found to the problems associated with the peculiar situation in which the black manager finds himself. In other words, an attempt must be made to reduce the inconsistencies, ambiguities and conflicts with which black managers are faced.

It could, of course, be argued that if one were to solve all of the problems associated with cultural differences, the black manager would be no longer marginal and half one's problems would be solved. However, even leaving aside the moral issue concerning what would appear to be a tacit acknowledgement, by the supporters of such a solution, of the incompatibility of black culture to the free enterprise system, it would appear that there is an increasing recognition of the fact that it is difficult to change people drastically in order to make them 'fit' the work which they must do. It would seem as though 'To a greater or lesser extent, the first ways in which the world has made sense to us continues to underpin our whole subsequent experience and actions'.[8, p.26; 17] Moreover, it would seem as though '. . . a lot of effort and money is wasted on trying to change people to fit jobs — when the fact is that it is virtually impossible to change people that way'.[17, p.5] Indeed, Miller[17, p.8] states that 'There is no point in trying to change the person, to shape him into a particular image, to improve his performance by having him work at developing weaknesses into strengths. There is no merit in the idea that you can educate or develop or sensitize or otherwise manipulate a person into being something *different from what he is*'. Miller[17, p.8] is essentially arguing that the individual functions in accordance with a set and constant motivational pattern and that he will perform his job in accordance with that pattern, regardless of the consequences.

Various authors have recently argued that organiza-

tions must attempt to fit people into the jobs which they can do best and in which they can be most productive. This, in turn, entails an understanding of motivational patterns, that is, what the individual is motivated to do, what abilities he is motivated to use, with what subject matter he is motivated to work and what kinds of relationships he is motivated to maintain.[17, 18] This implies accepting the black manager for what he is and, apart from providing him with knowledge of the job, allowing him, as far as possible, to do that job in a way which comes naturally. This, in turn, implies reducing the inconsistencies with which black employees are faced *vis-à-vis* those of Whites. In other words we must try, without reducing profits, to incorporate some aspects of other cultures into the working environment. For example, on a general level, we could look at community involvement in industry, labour union involvement in community action[19], group involvement in decision-making, group projects or work teams[20] and individual career paths (as opposed to the application of general behavioural theories to personnel generally).[16, p.107] It would appear that we should not only learn to tolerate different fundamental structures of experience,[8, p.65] but also to respect individual needs and goals.[16, p.106]

With respect to the reduction of the inconsistencies, ambiguities and conflicts confronting the black manager specifically, a number of further actions could be taken. For example, the definition of Key Performance Areas would give the black manager a clear idea of his roles and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* those of other managers, and charges of discrimination or window dressing could thus be dismissed.[21, 14, p.115] Moreover, a standard evaluation procedure could be developed with respect to the Key Performance Areas of all managers. Evaluations would, however, have to be discussed with the particular managers concerned in order that they might be seen as reasonable and objective and as void of any discriminatory overtones. Black managers could also be placed in the care of sympathetic mentors who would attempt to share the burden of the machinations of the informal organization. In this regard, Jones[14, p.115] suggests an appraisal of managers on their contributions to the company's equal opportunity objectives. According to Jones,[14, p.115] 'The entire management team must be motivated to change any deep beliefs about who does and doesn't fit with regard to colour. Accordingly, companies should use the appraisal system to make the welfare of the black trainee coincident with the well-being of his superior. Such action, of course, will probably receive considerable resistance from middle- and lower-level management. But managers are appraised on their ability to reach other important objectives; and, more significantly, the inclusion of this area in appraisals signals to everyone involved that a company is serious. Failure to take this step signals business as usual and adds to any credibility gap between the company and black employees'. Moreover, this kind of appraisal system motivates the mentor to school the black trainee in the realities of the political process in the organization. According to Jones, no one can survive in an organization without this kind of information. Jones[14, p.115] also suggests unquestionable top management involvement in and commitment to well thought-out plans of equal op-

portunity and direct two-way channels of communication between top management and trainee black managers. With regard to the latter, it would appear that Jones is tacitly recognizing a problem particularly pertinent to the South African context, namely, that of resistance on the part of first line white managers who may feel that their jobs are threatened. Jones argues that open channels of communication facilitate the intercession of a disinterested party if the black trainee finds a particular situation problematic. Moreover, Jones[14, p.115] feels that 'Clear channels of communication will also enable top management to provide empathetic sources of counsel to help the new black trainee combat the potentially crippling paranoia that I encountered. I didn't know whom to trust; consequently, I trusted no one. The counsel of mature and proven black executives will also help mitigate this paranoia'.

In the final analysis, it would appear that, as Jones[14, p.116] states, a moral commitment to equal opportunity is not enough. Even after overt discrimination and educational impediments have been removed, the black manager in a white world remains marginal. It is the responsibility of companies to recognize the peculiar situation in which the black manager finds himself and to seek solutions to the many problems with which he is faced.

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