ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: VARIABLE, ELASTIC AND MALLEABLE. A STUDY OF HOW VARIABLE PRACTISES MAY CONSTRUCT ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE IN AN AFRICAN SETTING

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports applied research on organisational culture. Data on everyday work experiences, organisational practices and methods of task execution were collected from six case study organisations in Ghana. This research uses in-situ applied methods rather than paper and pencil questionnaires and concludes that some organisations in Ghana have cultures that are best understood as variable – rather than stable, contested or fragmented. The paper argues that variability (inconsistency, changeability) in employee task execution, behaviours, use of organisational structures and procedures (and the regularity with which such variable practices are evident) create organisational cultures that are in essence malleable. This paper therefore advances the concept of 'organisational culture elasticity or malleability'. The implications for understanding and managing organisational culture in the African context are discussed.

Keywords: Organisational culture, variability, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a powerful reality and Organisational Culture has been a rich area of scholarly work over the last 30 years (Alvesson 1990, Noorderhaven & Tidjani 2001; Franklin & Pagan 2006). The scholarly works suggest that organisational culture is the evolved and created patterns of regularised values, interaction dynamics, behaviours, preferences, norms, symbolisms and propensities which have come to characterise and dominate the meaning frames, behaviours and practices of a group or organisation (Brown 1995; van den Berg & Wilderom 2004).

A number of strands can be identified in the organisational culture literature. These include the researchers who studied different organisational cultures and developed typologies based on the characteristics identified (Deal & Kennedy 1982). Schein's structural approach however shifted focus away from descriptions and typologies to the concept of organisational culture itself, and tackles the underlying philosophy and nature of the phenomenon indicating that organisational culture occurs at three levels: deep underlying assumptions, on-the-surface observable artefacts

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and symbols and in-between these two, are the shared stable values that embody or capture the essence of an organisation (Schein 1997). However, the assumption of stability which underlies the notion of shared values and patterns in organisational culture is contested by researchers like Martin and Meyerson (1988) who show that organisational cultures may be integrative, differentiated or fragmented. Other researchers have attempted to differentiate between organisational culture and organisational climate; however the debate as to whether there are differences between the 'culture' and 'climate' constructs has perhaps been laid to rest by Denison (1990) whose analysis shows that there is some confusion around the theoretical separation of the two and that climate and culture researchers are perhaps engaged in studying the same phenomenon. The organisational culture construct is therefore very well established and recent writers such as Tsui, Wang and Xin (2006) note the importance of organisational culture to various organisational outcomes. There are however, some gaps and challenges in the literature. These are considered below.

Afrocentric perspective

First, Sub-Saharan Africa is poorly represented in the orgnisational culture conversation. (Noordehaven & Tidjani 2001; Puplampu 2004). This is particularly important given the findings by Tsui et al., that organisational culture influences organisational outcomes and performance. Various development reports suggest that sub-Saharan Africa needs to continue making strenuous efforts at improving organisational functionality and effectiveness. Many researchers including Badu (2001) and Hofstede (2000) demonstrate that organisational and national cultures often influence efforts at organisational improvements. Given this point, it is worrying that there is a real paucity of work on organisational culture in sub-Saharan Africa.

The economic and organisational challenges of sub-Saharan Africa are numerous (Kuada 2004; Luiz 2006). It has been argued that the development aspirations of such countries lie in harnessing and improving systems and behaviours at the level of the firm or organisation (Asenso-Okyere 2001, Porter 1998). In this regard, organisational culture, manifested through varied behaviours of organisation members can determine the functional integrity of the organisation and by extension, the sustainability of various national development efforts. Puplampu (2010) offers a useful description of the Ghanaian corporate context.

Researchers confirm that many organisations in developing Africa, suffer from a lack of systematic and regularised patterns of behaviour and a tendency towards personal interventions in work practises as well as organisational dysfunctions which include executive arbitrariness and procedural lapses (Kuada 1994; Munene 1991, 1995; Puplampu 2005). The paucity of scholarly work on organisational issues in Africa, however, often hampers efforts at appropriate interventions (Analoui, 1999; Kamoche, Muuka, Horwitz & Debrah, 2004). This African gap represents the first motivation and objective of this paper: to contribute to our understanding of organisational culture in an African country and thereby offer pointers which should inform organisational interventions.

Everyday practices in organisations

Second, the impact of everyday practices, activities and task execution and variability in or of such practices, have not featured much in the culture literature (van den Berg & Wilderom

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2004). What do we mean by variability? Drawing on Essen's (2008) work variability refers to individualized deviations from ostensive standards, norms, practices and expectations. Variability also refers to the inconsistency and changeability that characterises the actions, activities and task behaviours of organisation members. As noted earlier, researchers like Martin (1992, 2002) argue that organisational culture can also be looked at from three perspectives: culture as integration, differentiation or fragmentation. The differentiation and fragmentation perspectives may appear to give voice to the notion of variability. But they do not. The differentiation perspective turns on the presence of many subcultures (often with an oppositional ethic) within an organisation – however within these subcultures there is a fair amount of consistency of process, thought and action (Hatch 1997; Kappos & Rivard 2008). The fragmentation approach on the other hand views culture as 'unstable, dynamic, complex and context-specific' (Pioch 2007, p. 212). Pioch's suggestion of instability does not capture an interesting paradox about variable practices. Variability of everyday practices and routines may produce a form of stability and may be anything other than ambiguous in interpretation, as Essen (2008) demonstrates. Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004) have thus argued that organisational cultures are best accessed using observable practices and daily interactions. Their position is buttressed by Hofstede (2000) who showed that organisations differ more on practices than values. These researchers therefore suggest that organisational culture research may be better served if more attention is paid to everyday practices and the dynamics of employees and work groups across different parts of an organisation. This gap provides the second objective of this paper: to use everyday practices to describe organisational culture.

The research reported here therefore uses descriptions of everyday events and activities – in an African setting – and the variability within these activities to propose a model of organisational culture that may facilitate more appropriate culture interventions, measurement and realignments (Balzarova Castka, Bamber & Sharp 2006; Wallace, Hunt, & Richards 1999) in African organisations.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS – VARIABILITY AND CULTURE

Researchers are increasingly recognising that organisational cultures are perhaps better accessed through work and organisational practises and day-to-day work activities (Hofstede 2000; Kostova 1999; Van den Berg & Wilderom 2004). In this regard, there have been calls for attention to the ordinary daily human attributes (task allocations, promotion decisions, interdepartmental collaborations, decision latitude etc) which underpin sustained organisational performance (DiMaggio 1997; Hansen & Wernerfelt 1989). Franklin and Pagan (2006) writing on execution of employee discipline note that variations in such practises are traceable to culture cues and dynamics. They suggest that interventions to remedy such practices would require understanding of the cultural causative factors. As Czarniawska-Joerges suggests, 'culture is the actual ways of doing things as contrasted to those prescribed in documents, decisions and regulations' (1992, p. 174). In other words, practices – formal, informal or variable – *are* expressions of culture. There is therefore the need to understand how practices construct organisational culture, especially where they are carried out in variable ways.

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Variable practises

Variability may be described as the individualized deviations from ostensive standards, norms, routines and expectations (Essen 2008; Franklin & Pagan 2006). In the conduct of their tasks, organisation members may deploy or engage in a range of everyday work practises, interactions and procedures in a manner that may be variable and inconsistent from time to time across the organisation. It is possible for such variations and inconsistencies in behaviours, behavioural expectations, work practices, interactions and procedures to reach normative proportions, such that the culture of the organisation may assume a malleable character – where malleability is a consequence of variability. This suggestion of malleability of organisational culture is counter intuitive to the position taken by dominant voices in the culture literature such as Schein (1997) who assert that culture refers to the least malleable elements of an organisation. While accepting that normative stability is an important component of organisational culture, there is growing evidence that variability, fragmentation and dissent, may also produce an embedded way of life (Hatch 1997; Martin 1992, 2002) and variability may yield stability in organisations (Essen 2008).

Organisational culture provides rules of behaviour, thought and feeling (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992; Khademian 2002; Schein 1997). These rules are evident through a series of tangible and intangible cues which dispose organisation members to act in specific, discernable and observable ways. Many employees and organisation members work in environments where task execution, managerial behaviour and business processes are carried out within the context of inconsistencies, informality, variations and deviations from expected norms (Bellizzi & Hasty 2000; Detert, Schroeder & Muriel 2000; Franklin & Pagan 2006). Franklin and Pagan have shown that cultural cues are an important factor in behavioural deviations. This research addresses this issue which is important due to the need to better target interventions in organisations where variability is seen as normative and perhaps problematic. Such interventions are certainly needed in developing countries – the context for this research.

METHOD

This is an applied practitioner-as-researcher study (Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson 2001) using interviews, document reviews and observations. The data were drawn from detailed interventions in six case study organisations (Denison & Mishra 1995; Parker & Bradley 2000). The types of data that 'qualify' for inclusion in a study of variability include: performative deviations (inconsistencies and apparent arbitrariness of action and practise) from ostensive expectations (such as standard operating procedures, business processes, meetings, organisational and HR practices); variable relationships which do not seem to conform to agreed patterns; deviations in the use of organisational structures such as authority lines and inconsistencies in application of same (Essen 2008; Franklin & Pagan 2006).

Procedures

Six organisations participated in this study based on requests for organisational level interventions. These requests were made to the researcher via email, telephone and/or written

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letter of invitation. Following these requests, the researcher set up initial meetings with the requesting authority, often the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), official responsible for HR or Administrative services. These initial meetings often lasted about 1 hour, took place at the offices of the organisation in question and were attended by the researcher, a research or consulting assistant as well as the company official and his or her assistant. The principal data tools were interviews, focus groups and employee durbars (large meetings or open encounters between employees and management which are a common feature in many Ghanaian organisations). Document analyses (memos, operations manuals and performance review forms) were also used. Employee feelings were explored; however, the research actively sought behavioural or other verifications of such expressed feeling. As a rule, interviews, focus group sessions, as well as data from in-company meetings were all unstructured. The formal interview sessions started with the following question: 'In your view, what are the critical issues or behaviours which define the way you all work or do things in this organisation?' Apart from the initial diagnostic interviews, which lasted about 1 hour, most other encounters lasted 10-15minutes (for the brief encounters) and 30-45 minutes for scheduled interviews, meetings and focus group sessions. The officials of each organisation were made aware that the data would be used as part of on-going research. They agreed on the proviso that all company details would be 'scrambled' or 'anonymized' to preserve confidentiality.

Data Analyses

The data analyses approach adopted is essentially grounded theory – drawing on the methodologies articulated by Hutchinson (1988). Three approaches were used. These are explained here. Firstly there was a process of description. Initial observations and meetings with the organisation members allowed the researcher to gain a sense of the internal organisation, its history and challenges. This descriptive stage produced the case descriptions below. Secondly, the analytical process during an intervention is a form of social criticism or judging. During this time the researcher used the interview and observation data to crystallize the identified patterns of social interactions, cues for task execution, routines, behaviours and preferences. The question of validity of data was addressed by constantly querying interview and observation data to ensure that researcher judgements mirrored reality. In the case details below, this stage is reflected in the researcher comments interspersed with quotes or descriptions of observed practises. The final stage in the analyses is the *consolidation* of initial descriptions, judgements from the process of social criticism and proposed solutions into a triangulated frame of reference. In the instance of this research, this process of consolidation is reflected in the conceptual model which is described as 'Organisational Culture Elasticity'. In the words of Hutchinson, research of this kind, must be able to '...explain the ongoing social processes in the action scene...' (1988:138). The findings are presented below as summary cases interspersed with interview quotes and research judgements following the descriptive-analytical approaches used by researchers like De (1981), Denison and Mishra (1995) and Essen (2008). Company names and details have been modified to protect their identity.

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CASE FINDINGS

Company 'A'

This is a 20 year ICT service provider that operates across two major cities. Eight managers were interviewed at different times; one durbar was attended by the researcher at which approximately 60 employees were present; approximately 45 employees were interviewed or had corridor chats with the researcher during the course of this study.

Staff and management demonstrated that the organisation had an open and friendly internal environment. For example, first names are used in a country where the tendency is to use formal titles in addressing colleagues; there was also in evidence, an 'open door' policy – staff had ready and open access to the CEO and other senior executives.

'Over here, we do not believe in using strict job titles (when addressing each other), that is suffocating… we all call each other by first names; right from the top bosses to the cleaners. We also have nick-names for some people, including the, boss-man himself…' (Employee 1)

The researcher observed that apart from the CEO's office, the entire organisation used open plan offices with open/glass doors; all Department heads had their desks in the same spatial area as subordinates and conversations were carried out in rather informal terms across desks and persons. The company also prided itself in developing a sense of 'belongingness' which was perceived as strong by many employees.

'Because of the feeling of belonging and family, nearly all our colleagues who leave for further studies always come back' (Employee 2).

It also had clear focus on achieving targets and providing significant service of worth to clients and customers – as evidenced by its leading standing in the ICT services sector, the media as well as attaining a number of service excellence awards.

'It is verifiable that in the Ghanaian space, we are clear leaders with innovative products and services coming out each year almost without fail for the last 10 years...' (Employee 3)

'We do feel pushed to achieve high targets. The problem is the rewards we are supposed to get for achieving those targets. It's still not as clear as we would want it to be... people are rewarded, but many times we don't understand the basis, other times they go to a lot of trouble to explain ...' (Feelings expressed at a Departmental session for back office staff facilitated by the researcher).

It seemed the organisation had grown rapidly without due attention to its structure. Hierarchical progression was therefore unclear. Staff promotions seemed to be at the instance of friendships and friendliness.

'When I look around, I see those colleagues of mine who started out on their careers with me at about the same time have clearly advanced. It seems those of us loyal ones in a place like this can never really be sure whether we will progress – unless your Director thinks very, very, very well of you...?' (Employee 4 who engaged the researcher informally during a corridor walk).

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Organisational processes although apparently adhered to, were mostly unwritten and depend very much on the professional integrity of each position holder in the conduct of any one task. This emerged when the researcher requested for various company documentation such as Standard Operating Procedures and Performance Appraisal Forms.

'Many people execute their work professionally, but use strategies that are often down to their own judgement, like when to see a client, how to dress... our bosses have very different ways of dealing with people in their departments...so sometimes you feel there are several different individual agendas here' (Sentiments expressed at an open staff meeting).

Organisational standards therefore appeared to vary from department to department. For example, in some departments, arriving late for work was severely sanctioned. In other departments it went unnoticed. Some departments had a dress code that was not in any way related to the business of the organisation; others had no such dress code. The net picture that emerged therefore was of an organisation with significant individual variations in the practices and procedures in use.

'Clearly, we had to call you in because we recognise that many of our business processes are not as well laid out as they could be. But we are still doing quite well as a company...so don't get the wrong impression...' (Manager 1)

The organisation's internal dynamics tolerated procedural interruptions, lengthy informal conversations and circumventions of immediate superiors etc.

'There are some things we really should not allow but which we do allow. For example, some friends of some of our managers come from outside and they spend many hours just chatting and laughing... and nobody says anything; we are not sure sometimes about how client details end up on the boss-man's desk – when the schedule officer in charge has not sent it up? Across this company, many people do not respect the grade structure. I think because we have such an open environment, people take it as a licence to take matters up to the Directors and CEO and others without passing through their manager...' (Employee 5).

Based on these case details, it was evident that there were variations in processes, the use of the organisation's structure and variations in how relationships are enacted.

Company 'B'

This is a 10-year old organisation engaged in the design and manufacture of machine tools and intermediate technologies and services. Eight managers were interviewed at different times; one durbar was attended by the researcher at which approximately 100 employees were present; one management meeting was attended by the researcher at which 20 managers were present; three focus groups with 10-15 staff per session were also conducted; approximately 30 employees were interviewed.

The data indicated that formal hierarchical routes were not often followed; officials used personal relationships to get subordinates to execute corporate tasks as well as to do non-work related activities during regulation hours.

'Some of our managers do not talk to each other. That's weird.' (Manager 1)

'My manager has asked me to go off and do foodstuff shopping for her on many occasions...' (Employee 1)

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A key causative factor for this state of things was found to be the paternalistic leadership approach of two powerful figures in the company's history: a previous CEO and a previous Board Chair.

'Our former bosses were very tuned to using their personal influences very much... you always felt you had to do things for them because they were asking you to – not ... because it had to do with the job or your task, if you get what we mean...' (Sentiments expressed by two managers during a lunch hour chat with the researcher).

'...we are in a very competitive sector. Every minute and every talent counts, but here we are with these difficulties, which are somehow being reported to our principals who may decide to stop supporting us...' (Manager 2)

'We run the risk of shutting ourselves down. Our managers are using company time to do their own things. Today they grant favours to a particular supplier, tomorrow they complain about that supplier. They always use their personal influence to get things done in some cases and in many other cases they attempt to quote the rule book...' (Manager 3)

In the case of this firm, interviews were also conducted with two staff that had left and they described the internal dynamics as 'patronising' or 'hijacked by a few relationships'. Relationships were used to serve various ends and decisions were significantly influenced by relational dynamics. This firm seemed to have a culture dominated by variable relationships.

Company 'C'

This is 6 year old international service company specialising in auditing, software installation and training. Four managers were interviewed at different times; one durbar was attended by the researcher at which all 20 employees were present; one focus group with 13 employees as held; 10 employees were interviewed individually. The findings indicated that the internal culture was characterised by apparent arbitrariness in executive decisions and associations as well as managerial over-friendliness (to some employees) and outright hostility to others.

'I think the boss hates some people and likes others – who are treated very well...' (Employee 1).

There was a manifest absence of established procedural mechanisms to govern non-task issues, and an unclear organisational structure.

'We do not have any real human resource manuals...Many of us are not sure by what means we are either promoted or our pay increased...Sometimes you feel the person next to you is above you in job grade, however, the way the senior manager speaks to him makes you think, no, this person must be junior to me...' (Sentiments expressed during a focus group).

The organisational structure had not been developed. The organisation was, however, driven by a highly integrated performance ethic which saw the customer as critical and employees went to significant lengths to ensure customer satisfaction (such as working long hours and taking the initiative to see clients and resolve issues during their own [free] non-work time). Interestingly, the apparent variability in reporting lines seemed to facilitate attention to some client concerns:

'I just come and do what I have to do and report to my client/s since I am not sure who my manager is. X says he is my boss, but I don't send anything to him – not many of us do...' (Employee 2).

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'Some of my colleagues send things up to the senior manager. That's the way they do it. I don't...and I get my results...' (Employee 4).

The variable practises identified in this organisation involved circumventions of structure, business processes and relationships.

Company 'D'

This is a large 20 year old manufacturing organisation specialising in building and construction, and maintenance services. 30 managers were interviewed at different times but often in pairs; three durbars were attended by the researcher at which approximately 200 employees were present each time; several management meetings were attended by the researcher at which numbers of managers present varied from 8-25; due to the large number of employees, interviews with non-managers were conducted on the back of the large staff durbars. Interviews with staff as well as a small number of customers showed an organisation that was insensitive to its market and could not respond to customer complaints:

'I sent an invoice to them 10 months ago for payment for services rendered to them. To date, I have not received payment and not even an acknowledgement letter...' (Complaint of a client).

'They supply us with some basic tools and equipment which we use in our organisation. It is always a battle just getting them to respond to breakdowns and calls for repairs...' (Complaint of a client).

'You may not understand but I am not very sure what our clients want sometimes...' (Manager 1).

Employees routinely circumvent processes:

'We can only get things done here when we by-pass some of the so-called big people...' (Manager 2).

'I think we prefer to do things our own way – as long as it works' (Employee 1)

'We are well aware that many of our middle level managers do not follow due process to get things done...' (Manager 3).

An area of variability which was evident related to the practises around meetings. Its history seemed to have contributed to an environment where meetings took 'forever' to set up and lateness was routine, different people called meetings and cancelled them (apparently arbitrarily).

'...nobody really gets punished for being late to work. I know some of our customers have also complained that our staff have kept them waiting for hours (for a technician to come and attend to something in the customers' office) then when they show up they do not even bother to apologise...' (Manager 4).

Sanctions were not often applied to procedural misbehaviour; when efforts were made to do so, such efforts were subject to lengthy processes of adjudication which did not tend to have clear cut-off or end-points.

'...we have discipline cases sitting on our books which are two years old... with no end in sight and... I am not sure why they are still pending...' (Employee 2).

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Managerial decision making seemed to be dominated by solving short term problems and perpetual 'fire-fighting'. This was evident from uncoordinated efforts made by the management team to reactively respond to market complaints. The researcher continuously asked to be provided with the organisation's market and customer care policy and strategy framework, but this was never supplied, ostensibly because no such policy or document had been prepared.

'...we know our invoices often go uncollected. Sometimes our billing department is proactive and actually follows up; other times our sales people collect for us. The senior management often blame the line supervisors when we have problems. At the moment, I think the middle management are not able to do the work. But what can I do? I cannot fire them as easily as I want...' (Manager 5).

The dominant areas where variable practices were identified were in time use and deployment of processes.

Company 'E'

This is an eight year-old business specialising in marketing and support services in the hotel and tourism industry. A series of diagnostic research interviews were carried out at all its operations, taking in all the managerial staff as well as 60% of the other employees.

The data suggested that staff who felt they were there at the start of the company, had created a culture of circumventing their immediate superiors and escalating all and any matters directly to top management.

'...we started this company with the big man. We have a right to be here and we will always tell him things whether our own manager likes that or not...' (Employee 1)

Top management had knowingly or unknowingly contributed to this by actively seeking information as to what pertains at various remote sites from some of these 'loyalists'.

'...at the start of the company, as I am sure you can understand, I had to be aware of everything all the time. The best way was to speak directly with anyone concerned... we have since had a number of general managers and therefore have a structure. But the competition in the industry is fierce and some general managers of other companies have been known to secretly deal with competitors so I am always on my guard...' (Manager 1).

The cumulative effect of this was that employees seemed to regularly disregard the published organisational structures. Another critical finding was that a key member of the management team who had to coordinate affairs between head office and various sites was mal-performing. This was evident in instances of coordination lapses and administrative gaps leading to considerable customer complaints and employee angst. This officer's approach to dealing with his own performance lapses was to blame others and orchestrate a culture of gossip, back biting and influence peddling. For a period of almost three months, the said officer was hardly at post, apparently managing his schedules from home – interspersed with brief office visits. Management, however, was unable/unwilling to sanction this person, leading to considerable feelings of procedural injustice (amongst other employees) regarding performance management and appraisal. The researcher explored why management seemed unable to sanction the apparently errant manager.

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'It seems there is a situation across the organisation where not many employees receive clear appointment letters. Many contract letters have lapsed. Poor employee performance is not always documented. The management sometimes seem to take decisions arbitrarily.' (Employee 2)

'There seems to be a fear of the legal implications of sanctioning employees who did not seem to have anything on their personal files relating to the area or issue requiring sanction.' (Employee 3)

'We are not sure what will happen when we fire people. So we think we will just wait and see' (Manager 1).

Employees interviewed consistently referred to what may be interpreted as executive inconsistency in decisions. They mentioned a case in which a 'minor' (according to employees) infraction on the part of a temporary staff (he left his post one hour before close of work) led to a severe sanction: a lengthy suspension from work. While a poor performing manager seemed to be let off without any sanctions.

'Employee 6 left work early from the client site because he said something about a family problem. Management heard about this and he was suspended without pay for about two months... they say Manager 3 has been sick, so we do not get the letters and information we need here and we often have to find our own means of coordinating things with Head office... I know Manager 3 is not sick. We see him when we go back to X, yet he is not doing the work and he is still taking pay and yet nothing has been done...' (Manager 4).

Company 'F'

This is a 10 year old specialist media firm. Four managers and 22 employees were interviewed. The researcher attended one employee durbar. It has a strong culture of participative decision-making, open door policies and a flat organisational structure. This strong open culture is evident the moment one walks into its offices: all the office doors are open, there is a common area for having cocoa breaks; except when visiting client sites, the dress code is largely informal, employees are expected to be very critical and forthright in their debates and discussions of all task and corporate matters.

'We thrive on debate here. That has been in place since our inception...it took us a while to break down the Ghanaian hierarchical system and ensure that people contribute to debate because of their ability, not their position in the company' (Manager 1).

Despite this strong culture, there was evidence of some weakening in employee continuance commitment. This was subsequently investigated via qualitative interviews.

'Over the last two years or so, every six months, at least three consulting staff leave' (Manager 2)

Staff were unsure of the dimensions used in assessing their performance. There was significant variation in terms of what was assessed, when assessment took place and whether assessment data were actually used in downstream HR decisions. Many felt the nature and practise of assessment was down to one's superior.

'My manager is very detailed in doing his performance assessments. He asks many questions, he even seems to keep a diary from the beginning of the year. Out of the five other managers, I am told of only one other who also does what my manager does. The rest have no structure for assessing staff. They do their own thing... are we in the same organisation? ...I should move to the other department!' (Manager 3; Employee 2).

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This created significant consternation as it led to variations in the depth, nature and quality of assessments carried out by various managers. Despite this consternation, the fluidity/flexibility had so come to characterise the norm that, paradoxically, supervisors who sought to reduce the variability by introducing routinized elements such as linking performance to prior targets and querying performance in terms of some predefined standards as well as being copious in their assessment notes were described as 'subjective' and 'biased' – because, across the organisation, most staff were not used to such 'rigour' in assessments.

'Look at these notes and this performance assessment sheet [at this point respondent shows a performance assessment form with hand written notes in various sections of the form]. This is supposed to be the standard tool. I am about the only one who uses it. Compare with this one [at this point shows another form which is ostensibly different and without any spaces for note writing], which I know a colleague has used - 'cos it came up at a management meeting. My colleague drew it up himself and used it. These differences are creating a situating where when I use the standard form, I get flack from my subordinates. So it's like we are all getting used to doing things in various ways...' (Manager 4).

The organisational and operations support function was described as 'inconsistent' in how it handled logistics requests from field officers and information dissemination across the organisation. They were said to subject requests for various administrative supports to lengthy delays – yet the staff responsible were hardly sanctioned.

'We do not seem to have set routines for doing many things... you wait for days to receive information from a meeting that took place in X, but you call a friend and he says they got theirs long ago; you put in a request for travel per diem and you often go without it...then you hear someone else got theirs before they went on the field trip...we have become so used to this now that we either find alternative ways or simply are surprised when things happen according to the book...' (Employee 5).

It was evident that there was variability around processes, administrative procedures as well as performance management. It is possible that in the case of this company, the effort to dismantle Ghanaian hierarchies and the imposition of alien norms may have contributed to variability and a dysfunctional culture.

DISCUSSION

These case data provide rich details of the contextual realities within which the members of the organisations work. In the ensuing discussion, we adopt a similar approach to De (1981), who examined six organisations and drew on case specifics, histories, as well as conceptual arguments to address the aims of the study as well as tease out the implications and theoretical possibilities.

Across the six case study organisations, there was an evident pattern of variability in member behaviours, task execution and relationships. This research sought to identify situations, activities and practices organisation members acknowledge as variable and consider how these come to define the organisational culture. Below, the variable practices identified in the various organisations and the cues which appear to underlie these practises are presented in Table 1. Based on the variable practises, cues and interventions applied in each case, we make the case

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for a form of organisational culture which may best be described as malleable and elastic, hence 'Organisational Culture Elasticity' (OCE).

Based on the case details and the summary on Table 1 below, it seems the descriptions, examples and instances of variability found may be captured under four descriptive headings. These are time, relationship, process and structure variability or malleability. These are examined briefly below; the different expressions of malleability are also articulated and the OCE concept is explained as a useful conceptual and analytical tool for understanding organisational culture.

TABLE 1: Summary of field data on variable practices, cues and resultant elastic or malleable dimensions of culture

Variable Practices and Organisations where evident		Organisational Cues	Interventions adopted	OCE Dimension
Variable promotion practices Unclear progression path Unwritten processes Variable dress 'codes' Variable application of sanctions Task and procedural interruptions 　　VARIABILITY OF PROCESSES & PROCEDURES	A C D E F	Non-sanctioning of defaulting members Lack of operating guidance Absence of official standards	Redesign of Performance Management systems Process redesign and consolidation	Process Elasticity or malleability
Use of friendships Frequent requests for non-job related activities by senior officers Friendships mediate organisational activities 　　VARIABILITY AROUND RELATIONSHIPS	A B C	Paternalistic behaviours of powerful superiors Simultaneous use of informal friendship and formal regulations	OD Processes Employee counselling	Relationship Elasticity or malleability
Circumvention of hierarchy Variable use of reporting lines Simultaneous regard and disregard of structure 　VARIABILITY AROUND USE OF THE STRUCTURE	A C E	Executive acquiescence Apparent solution of extant business problems	Redesign of Organisational Structure	Structural Elasticity or malleability
Variable time use Variable attention to punctuality Non-sanction of time variability 　　VARIABILITY AROUND TIME USE	D	Non application of sanctions Equivocation about impact of variability	Orientation sessions on time value	Time Elasticity or malleability

OCE – The Concept and initial attempts at defining its dimensions and components

The central idea of OCE is that the culture of an organization may arise from variability in the practices, activities and member adherence to the organisation's structures and processes. OCE suggests that these activities and normative adherence may vary on a continuum from highly inelastic or least malleable to extremely variable, elastic and malleable. The level of elasticity is an indication of the flexibility and latitude granted, usurped or tolerated in behaviours,

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interpretation of events and adherence to due process as well as variability in the interpretation of values or principles held by the organisation.

Dimensions of OCE. OCE is conceptualized as a multidimensional concept with a headline continuum of *Elasticity—Inelasticity (OCEe–OCEi):* which refers to how much latitude and variation there is in the behaviours and actions of organization members in relation to everyday functions. The *OCEe-OCEi* continuum is operationalized through the observable characteristics of another dimension: *Behavioural expressions of elasticity or inelasticity (OCEx).* This refers to positive (functional – such as those alluded to by Stewart 2006) or negative (dysfunctional – such as those alluded to by Puplampu, 2005) behaviours, which arise from the level of latitude possible in the behaviours of organization members.

The elastic or malleable culture (OCEe) organisation tolerates considerable flexibility and variation, does not seem to demand stringent adherence to systems and processes. Members may therefore use alternative methods, have little regard for time definitions; less demanding in adherence to procedure etc. In the inelastic or non-malleable culture, (OCEi), the organisation is in many ways inflexible on various matters. It has established its modus operandi on various dimensions and demands strict adherence. Members are unlikely to tolerate procedural misadventures; are more likely to seek rigid enforcement of established norms, perhaps less individualistic in practice and more geared towards use of common approaches across departments and units. The expressions dimension (OCEx) suggests that elasticity or inelasticity may manifest in various behaviours and values, which may be mutually exclusive, paradoxical, contradictory, positive or negative and reflecting of the mosaic of human behavioural possibilities within any one organisation.

Through the applied interventions, four expressions of elasticity or malleability were identified with concomitant behaviours. These are firstly, time elasticity. This relates to a flexible interpretation of chronological time, time use and associated concomitants such as reporting deadlines, meeting times etc. In the organisational culture that is time-elastic, time specificity is difficult to achieve (Harris & Moran 1996). The work of Brislin and Kim (2003) and Francis-Smythe and Robertson (2003), provide some direct explication of the notion of time use in cultures and organisations. They speak of the challenges associated with clock time, punctuality, task and social time use during work. Company D registered time elasticity or malleability.

Then there is structure elasticity. This is the situation where organisations operate rather fluid structures in terms of the operationalization of the organizational structure. Departments, hierarchies, roles and functional segregation are flexibly interpreted and flexibly applied. This may be because structures are so ill-defined that circumvention is seen as normal; or structural parameters are well laid out, but a certain amount of latitude has become permissible for a variety of reasons (Morgan 1997). The collapse of the Barings Bank group in 1995, as described by Nicholson (2000) and Hannan, Polos and Carroll (2003), present perhaps one of the most examined cases of corporate failure. The dynamics surrounding this failure suggest a combination of structural loopholes exploited, relationships taken for granted and processes circumvented.

The third dimension identified is process elasticity. The tasks executed and services provided by organisations as well as the frameworks by which they manage internal issues and events
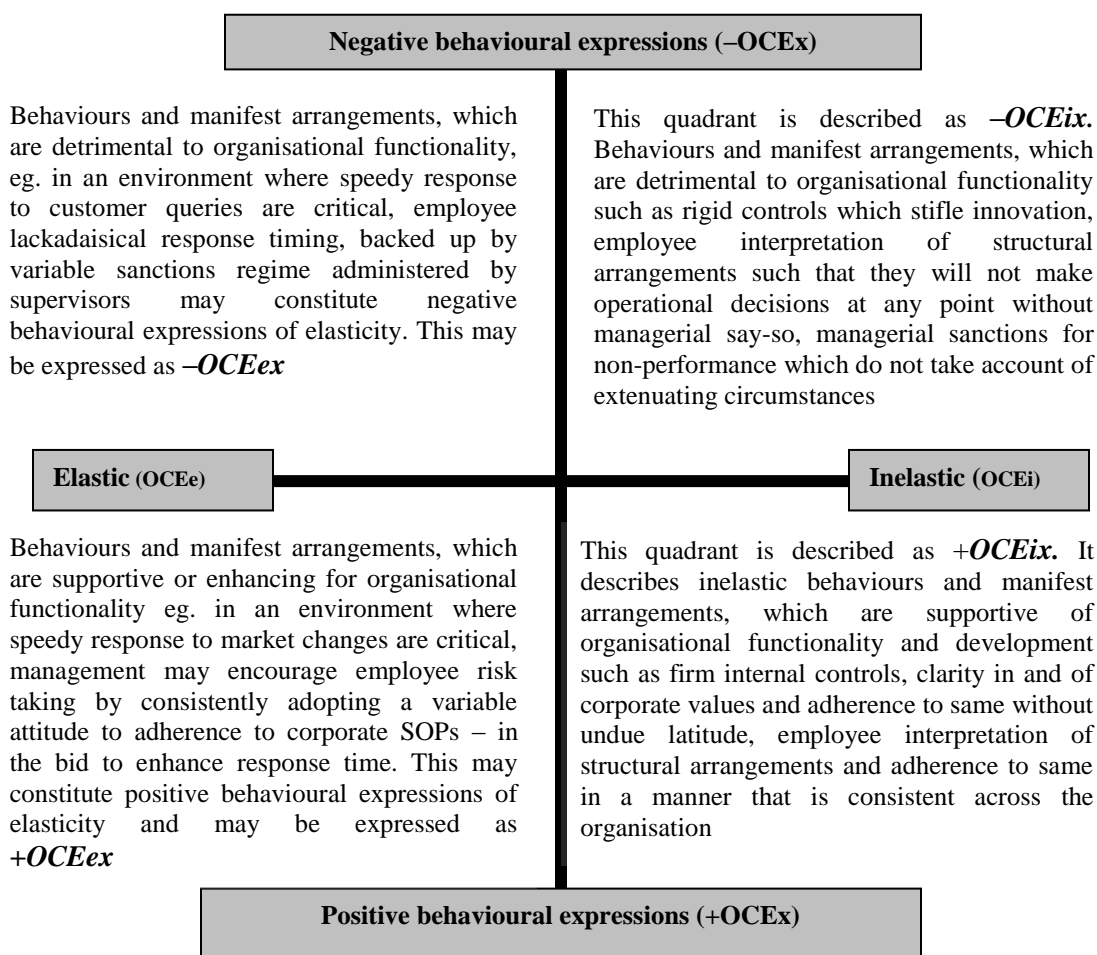
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typically follow certain processes and procedures. These are variously described as Supply Chain Processes, Business Processes, Internal Controls or Standard Operating Procedures. Process elasticity is to operate in a culture where processes are ill-defined, non-existent or present but partly or completely set aside on a regular basis. Process elasticity may therefore exist whether or not SOPs are documented and espoused.

Finally, there is relationship elasticity. In this form of elasticity, relationships and friendships are used to a significant extent and organisational life and existence is often subject to personalization, which stretch into and perhaps influence decision making (Munene 1991, 1995).

Quadrants of OCE. Four quadrants of organizational culture are possible, based on the interaction between elasticity (OCEe) or inelasticity (OCEi) and member behaviours/actions which may be positive (+OCEx) or negative (–OCEx). The diagrammatic representation and descriptions in Figure 1 below are an initial attempt at constructing the characteristics of the four quadrants.

FIGURE 1: Dimensions and quadrants of Organisational Culture Elasticity

Negative behavioural expressions (–OCEx)	
Behaviours and manifest arrangements, which are detrimental to organisational functionality, eg. in an environment where speedy response to customer queries are critical, employee lackadaisical response timing, backed up by variable sanctions regime administered by supervisors may constitute negative behavioural expressions of elasticity. This may be expressed as **–OCEex**	This quadrant is described as **–OCEix.** Behaviours and manifest arrangements, which are detrimental to organisational functionality such as rigid controls which stifle innovation, employee interpretation of structural arrangements such that they will not make operational decisions at any point without managerial say-so, managerial sanctions for non-performance which do not take account of extenuating circumstances
Elastic (OCEe)	**Inelastic (OCEi)**
Behaviours and manifest arrangements, which are supportive or enhancing for organisational functionality eg. in an environment where speedy response to market changes are critical, management may encourage employee risk taking by consistently adopting a variable attitude to adherence to corporate SOPs – in the bid to enhance response time. This may constitute positive behavioural expressions of elasticity and may be expressed as **+OCEex**	This quadrant is described as **+OCEix.** It describes inelastic behaviours and manifest arrangements, which are supportive of organisational functionality and development such as firm internal controls, clarity in and of corporate values and adherence to same without undue latitude, employee interpretation of structural arrangements and adherence to same in a manner that is consistent across the organisation
Positive behavioural expressions (+OCEx)	

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Variability defines culture through cues and scripts

Organisational culture, defined as the patterns of behaviour, interaction dynamics, processes and procedures allows the possibility for members of the organisation to develop a set of behavioural cues (Franklin & Pagan 2006) which may be embedded within variable practice. Where such variable practices are not isolated events then the combination of cues and variable practices may create a peculiar culture dynamic. Take Company A: some staff by-pass immediate supervisors when escalating issues upwards, others do not. Some departments adhere to a dress code, others do not. This is variability at work. The perceived open managerial environment seems to have provided the behavioural cues, which facilitated this variability. The six cases show instances where the organisation and its members accept circumventions of structure, variability in processes and standards, use of relationships, a simultaneous use and avoidance of performance monitoring and/or instances where the culture insists on certain values and associated behaviours such as open doors, use of first names, focus on target achievement etc. Take Company F: performance appraisals were carried out, but there were clear variations in how these appraisals were executed. The existence of behavioural possibilities along the continuum may be said to derive from the scripts that have become embedded in the minds and dispositions of different organisation members as a result of cues such as non-sanction, tacit acquiescence or supervisory enforcements or lack of same. Scripts provide the modus in particular settings, orchestrate behaviours and embed how said behaviours are to be carried out (Lyons 2005; Stone-Romero, Stone & Salas 2003).

The scripts that people follow to execute a range of tasks, behaviours or processes, could be said to be tightly regulated, controlled and prescribed (inelastic) or loosely regulated with considerable amount of room for circumventions etc (elastic). Scripts are in constant state of flux and change, adapted as need be to enable people interpret the behaviour of others as well as guide own behaviour. It seems however, that for scripts to assume normative proportions, they would have been preceded by cues (Franklin & Pagan, 2006). For example, Stewart's (2006) analysis of organisational adaptability as elasticity, suggests that decentralised authority, managerial latitude, organisational structures and implicit capacity provide the cues for members to test allowable limits or bounds. Hannan, Polos and Carrol explaining some of the antecedents of the failure of Barings Bank note that '…culture governs how work gets completed, how members interact…the notion of culture includes both tacit knowledge of the details of the work processes…and norms encoding the informal understandings and practices for interaction…' (2003, p. 4).

From Table 1, we see that the cues that seemed to underpin variability include non-sanctioning of defaulting members, lack of official standards and operating guidance, powerful significant persons and their cultivation of subordinates, mixed messages emanating from simultaneous use of formal as well as informal routines, executive acquiescence and so on. These appear to be the prevalent signals, codes and tacit knowledge which are picked up by members and used to develop scripts of variable behaviours.

Based on the findings from this study, it seems that to identify an organisation's culture as variable, elastic or malleable four antecedents or conditions must come together. These are:
- regularity of mention by organisation members of a range of variable practices

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- objective and verifiable evidence of the variability referred to by members
- executive assent or concurrence that variability is a feature of the organisation
- evidence of cues which act as triggers for the behavioural scripts of organisation members.

The role of national culture

It is perhaps to be expected that national culture would have some impacts on the malleability of organisational culture. The paper however does not dwell on this issue as the research did not set out to examine the influence of national culture dimensions on variability. However, two examples are worth making. In Ghanaian culture (in common with many in Africa), relationships are important in many aspects of life. This may account for the tendency to use personal relationships to circumvent processes and procedures. Secondly there is anecdotal evidence about what may be described as 'African time' – a preference for imprecise calibrations of time and time use as well as laissez-faire attitude to punctuality and so on. This may also account for the time malleability found in some of the organisations. Further research is however needed before clear linkages which go beyond popular stereotyping and spurious generalizations can be established.

What are the implications for application?

The potential implications of culture malleability may be considered under the following headings: factors causative of elasticity, remedial actions and implications for managing organisational culture.

Causative factors. It seems that executive unwillingness or inability to prescribe certain modus and demand adherence contribute to the presence of variability and culture elasticity. It also seems that managerial willingness to actively use a variety of communication and influencing channels promote variability and malleability. Organisational situations where procedures and business processes are unwritten and members find it expedient to circumvent hierarchies also create malleability. Inconsistent sanctions regimes also seem to be both a cause and an effect of malleability.

Remedial actions. Across all the six organisations, three main corrective activities were a common occurrence: [re]design of organisational structures, [re]orientation of organisation members towards less variability and greater inelasticity in process and structure use and [re]design of performance appraisal systems. This suggests that corrective action – at this point and where malleability is seen as negative – may require moving the organisation in the direction of inelasticity. More importantly, the malleability concept allows a near direct attention to those variable practices which may be contributing to dysfunctionality.

Managing organisational culture. Most discussions of organizational culture change focus on the traditional notions of values, assumptions, behaviours etc. Few studies draw in areas such as organisational structure (Walsh 2004) and processes. The evidence gathered and discussed here as well as the difficulties around corporate failures suggests that any effort to manage and/or change culture has to factor in organisational structure and process issues. It seems also that the critical role played by top executives in building and sustaining culture needs to be appreciated by Ghanaian corporate leaders. Evidence from the organisations studied

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suggests that many of the leaders had knowingly or unknowingly adopted a laissez-faire approach to organisational practices, thus allowing variability to grow. Another area that corporate leaders and managers need to work on is tightening performance appraisal and sanctions systems as a means of directing member behaviour.

Does variability impact organisational functionality? In all the cases, one or other form of stakeholder dissatisfaction or concern was evident. Many scholars note that the culture of an organisation impacts its effectiveness (Denison & Mishra 1995; Tsui et al 2006). Although effectiveness is a vexed concept (Denison 1990), Scott (1992) suggests it centres on organisational outcomes, adequacy of organisational processes and structures. The elasticities noted in the case study organisations arise from variability in operating mechanisms such as business processes and structures. This appears to create dysfunctionalities and outcome challenges. As Balthazard, Cooke and Potter (2006) demonstrate, dysfunctional cultures seem to arise from 'deficits in operating efficiency and effectiveness' (Abstract). Tentatively, therefore, it seems variability does impact organisational functioning.

Limitations, future research and concluding remarks

There are a number of limitations with this work so far. This work emerged from applied research. All the organisations sampled for the six case-studies had some functional challenges, which led to the need for some interventions. This may imply that the OCE concept may be linked to organisational health (Puplampu 2005) and the functionality or otherwise of internal systems. It was evident that in all the cases, remedial action tended to move the organisations along the continuum towards greater inelasticity. Secondly, this research did not explore national culture as a mediating variable – although national culture may influence the nature of malleability. Thirdly, the OCE model advanced is based on work with six organisations. This may limit the possibility for theoretical generalizations.

An important research agendum going forward, would be the design and execution of large scale surveys to determine the viability of elasticity or malleability as a credible concept in the organisational culture debate. This may be done through the construction of a series of questionnaire items such as those used by Denison and Mishra (1995). However, given the need to ground the OCE concept in observed reality rather than perceived judgements, OCE research may always call for combining and triangulating survey data with in-situ observations. Future research may also consider the extent to which OCE is applicable to non-African environments – especially since the descriptions and scenarios may not necessarily be Africa specific. While the OCE concept happens to have derived from applied research in Ghana, it may not be confined to Ghana or Africa. This needs to be explored.

The results of this applied study show that organisational researchers may usefully conceive of the cultures of some organisations along a continuum of flexibility arising from observable variable practices and behaviours. The research demonstrates viability of the conceptual arguments put forward by Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004) that organisational culture researchers need to examine day-to-day realities in organisations. The paper also shows how certain organisational cues such as executive inaction and so-called open door environments may contribute to the development of a malleable culture. OCE as a concept defines culture along a continuum of malleability and depends on identifying actual practices, behaviours and

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interaction patterns. Therefore, it should be possible to categorise or measure practices, behaviours etc in terms of this definition and locate the organisation's malleable culture along the continuum. This should make it possible to investigate causal or correlation links between malleability and outcomes such as customer satisfaction, employee task execution etc. It seems therefore, that there are real possibilities for applied interventions in organisational cultures based on the notion of malleability – especially since it focuses on tackling tangible factors (business processes, performance assessments etc) that managers deal with on a daily basis.

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