

DEALING WITH 'DIFFERENCE': AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO 'WESTERN' AND 'AFRICAN' VALUES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE

Mollie Painter-Morland
University of Pretoria

Abstract

The question of how to deal with difference has been keenly debated in all spheres of South African life. How do we deal with different cultures and religions in the pluralistic working environment that all of us are exposed to every day? This article seeks to address one specific problematic issue in the debate, namely the tendency to use essentialist cultural categories such as 'Western' and 'African' as the main explanatory grid with which we seek to define, and solve the ethical dilemmas of pluralistic environments. The article will distance itself from both the modernist ideal of the 'rational' subject, as well as from cultural essentialism and the overemphasis being placed on cultural group identity. Moving away from a typically modernist approach aiming at essentialism, consensus and metanarratives, an alternative approach of moral bricolage is advocated. The individual, the moral bricoleur, seen as a mix of various elements (cultural, religious, social, sexual, etc) is freed from categories in order to deal episodically with each moral dilemma.

1. Introduction

This article was initially aimed at making a contribution towards value-creation in pluralistic working environments, by analysing the impact of the interaction between so-called 'Western' and 'African' values on the workplace. Since the project started many months ago, it seemed as if dealing with the interaction between 'Western' and 'African' values prompted one to open the one can of worms after the other. Even though the act of labelling itself is dangerous - as this article will no doubt prove - I will attempt to label these cans of worms for the sake of my modernist readers. Before emptying the cans of worms on their laps, I might at least provide clarity surrounding the issues that are going to be addressed in the course of this project.

- *CAN 1*: The dangers inherent to essentialist cultural categories such as 'African' and 'Western'.
- *CAN 2*: Postmodernism -despite the problems surrounding its content, discontents and lack of content - as an approach to pluralism.
- *CAN-DO 3*: The praxis of the South African working environment as a very specific challenge.

I was confronted by the unsavoury content of the first can on various occasions. And as is to be expected of the South African scene - the worms turned out *not* to be merely black or white, but full of rainbow-colours instead. And yet, it seems as though the rainbow nation is still being organised in terms of the old dualisms of the past. Unfortunately, the overemphasis on culture as explanatory tool did not disappear from the South African scene together with the Apartheid regime. In following the debates in

the press and whilst attending meetings on how to deal with our pluralistic environment, I was struck time and again by how we have sold out to the Apartheid jargon of culture, race, *difference*, as being the categories within which, and despite which, we must find one another. And in using the jargon we have inherited, we are also selling out to its presuppositions. Am I saying that we have no differences, or that those we have should be thrown in the big old idealistic melting pot to disappear forever? Not at all. What I am saying is that the way in which differences have been defined in the past, and the way in which people still use it, and fight for it, should be deconstructed. The meaning of our differences should not so easily be fitted into our inherited categories. Rather, we should look suspiciously at the way in which these categories determine our thoughts, feelings, presuppositions, and therefore, our morality. We should embrace the uncertainties of not having fixed group identities to guide our beliefs and values.

The second can is full of decapitated worms. You see, everyone was very eager to take a bite of the beautiful forbidden apple called *post-*, but they quickly realised that the bite seems to have a bitter aftertaste. Hence the worms in the can... The first reason for the decapitated worms is the fact that the so-called 'post-modern' approach has certain consequences that seem to be bitter pills to swallow. Objections against the 'relativism' that seems to result from it, and the issue of identity that is permanently in flux, are only some of the arguments against postmodernism. The second reason for the decapitated worms is that the term 'postmodernism' seems to be a battleground of arguments: What exactly does the term mean? How do we use (and abuse) it? and Who are the 'true' postmodernists? In the consequent search for definitions, 'true' postmodernists, and so forth, 'postmodernism' became an umbrella term open to whoever wants to use and abuse it as a means of being either trendy, rebellious, or powerful. It seems that all the struggles in *this* can of worms led to a situation of discontent, and in the end - lack of content. Still, I believe that certain aspects of post-modernity poses a few viable options to South Africans. It constitutes a certain style, a certain approach to life. Even though I tend to question the label 'post-modern', as I tend to question the labels 'African' and 'Western', I will still suggest that we take certain 'post-modern' comments and suggestions seriously. We should look beyond the can of worms and develop a new approach, without necessarily looking for a *post-* label to stick on to it.

The third can, the 'can-do', represents an attempt to do what in the modernist paradigm would have been called the *applicatio* after the *explicatio*. However, with all the best intentions in the world I could not come up with a ten-step, or seven-habits scheme to success in ethics in the workplace. But this does not mean that there is no 'can-do' at the bottom of all the cans of worms. This can-do is no quick fix though. What it can be, is an approach that could entice people towards a more responsible, a more exciting, but also a less reassuring moral stance in the workplace. Hold on tight, it's going to be a rough ride.

2. The first can of worms: the overemphasis on cultural categories such as African and Western

In so-called new South Africa there has been an increasing number of publications attempting to address ways of handling the various 'differences', mainly in the cultural sense of the word, existing in South Africa. It is seen as part redressing the heritage of the 'Apartheid Regime's' strategies of dealing with difference. Ironically, the ways in which this has been attempted has kept intact certain very important presuppositions

underlying Apartheid's way of dealing with difference. The first important assumption that is still readily made, as I will show in works such as *'Saam in Afrika'* and *'Anderkant die reënboog'*, by theologian Attie van Niekerk, is that difference should be defined mainly along the lines of cultural difference (often coinciding with racial differences). The second important assumption is that the process of reconciliation involves that the conflicting groups come to some kind of agreement on what the terms of coexistence would be. Accepting difference thus involves defining distinct groups, and using the cultural characteristics of these groups to explain moral behaviour and guide coexistence.

The question I would like to pose is whether it is not possible to refrain from employing dualisms like universality and particularity, individual and groups, public and private by accepting that all these dualisms coincide within every individual. Therefore authenticity is not only created by the unique combination of group and social influences existing in every human being, authenticity is also created by the dignity of the individual in terms of his/her being a human being. Individuality need not be threatening to group identity if group identity is seen as being a legitimate aspect (one amongst many) of every individual. The problem with taking group identity as being *the defining* characteristic of the individual, implies that the individual is no more than the sum-total of the characteristics of the specific group. For instance, being a white female Afrikaner, member of the Dutch Reformed Church, I will for instance be forced into a certain mould as agreed upon (exactly who would decide this I do not know!). If it is decided, for instance, that reading Nietzsche does not fit in as a characteristic of this group, I would be forced to decide whether reading Nietzsche or belonging to group is more important to me (or to read Nietzsche secretly!). The restrictive, manipulative character of this situation is clear. This example may sound far-fetched, but it is exactly this type of argument that is used to treat the differences between two even broader groups such as so-called 'Africans' and 'Westerners'.

Critics of the post-modern objections against dualisms, poses the question whether *duality* necessarily implies *dualism*. Can we not agree to distinguish, but not to divide? The critical aspect in debates such as these is the role that language, concepts and categories play in determining our presuppositions and thereby, our values. Stout (1981:200) for instance argues for an acknowledgement of the holistic relationship of values with the broader linguistic context - moral language cannot be set apart from the cultural, political, social context in which it operates. This acknowledgement is often oil on the fire of those modernists who see cultural categories as the main explanatory tool in moral situations. If culture and politics infuses moral language, should we not use cultural distinctions to explain and guide morality? I believe that if these so-called distinctions originated in a context of political injustice, inequality and prejudice, we should be careful to use these terms uncritically once the power configurations have changed. Prejudices do not disappear over night. In such cases the so-called distinctions are in fact dualism keeping the 'us' versus 'them' paradigm intact.

I would use an example from Attie van Niekerk's book to illustrate this. Van Niekerk (1996) describes modern black people as being in what he calls 'die tussenveld'. He acknowledges that modern blacks have internalised certain 'Western' values like the ability to think analytically, thereby trying to overcome criticism on his earlier work *Saam in Afrika* on the way in which he creates very abstract stereotypes of Westerns and Africans. But the inherent bipolarity of Western and African, indicated by various critics

such as Goosen (1993:4), is still kept intact. This is illustrated by the fact that he stresses the unnatural character of this 'tussenveld' as being something that stands over and against the cultural values of blacks and which causes trauma because of their inability to integrate the two. It seems that Van Niekerk sees certain characteristics of the so called 'African' tradition as irreconcilable with certain aspects of the Western civilization. This of course presupposes a typical modernist world view of mutually exclusive unambiguous truths. This world view has increasingly been questioned, especially in the human sciences such as psychology, anthropology and history. Even in the natural sciences 'chaos theory' has forever changed the certainty surrounding unambiguous truth. My hypothesis would be that the intense tensions within modern individuals are much rather caused by stereotypical cultural, gender and economic categories and the expectations inherent to them. If individuals could have the freedom to view these differences within themselves as a strength rather than a problem, diversity may finally produce happy individuals and not, in Van Niekerk's terms 'schizophrenics'.

A further, very dangerous consequence of this insistence upon primarily using cultural categories to handle difference, is that the 'other' is always defined in terms of the self. The 'other' always constitutes the not-like-me, or not-like-us. This leads to a situation where so many categories for explaining the actions of the 'other' exist beforehand, that many distortions of the real motives for action result. All the other variables but our own perceptions are taken out of the account. To use an example from Attie van Niekerk's (1996:9) book again. Being a keen student of culture, and having a very neat set of characteristics of how Africans think (that is non-rational, non-individual etc) he comes up with the following explanation which speaks of distinct moral value-judgements. He explains the fact that black students during the Apartheid years burnt schools, post-offices and public buildings by referring to the 'traditional African belief' in circular life-processes. He states that Africans think: To be able to build, you must first destroy, in order to live, you must first kill. By explaining the student's actions through the cultural grid he ignores various other variables. Just to name a few examples of other variables: these incidents occurred during the armed struggle, for a cause now seen as just; it was young people for whom the schools and public services were symbols of oppression, often even more than symbols - very real instances of injustice and discrimination; the student's age, their emotional trauma, etc also probably have nothing to do with their cultural beliefs. By bringing these variables into play I am not attempting to justify their actions, or to moralise about it. I merely want to indicate the danger of overemphasising culture as explanatory tool.

We seem to still believe that if we are able to find the essential western-ness in Westerns, and the african-ness in Africans, that we will somehow be able to a little place in the sun for both. I believe that we should view identity in a completely different way. Identity is not determined *solely* by the cultural group that we belong to, nor is it determined *solely* by sex, race, political view-points or positions. It is constituted by all of the above, and more... And if we are to find values that we can share with each other in a specific context, whether it be as Christians, friends, as colleagues or as a nation, we have to determine where each of us stands with regard to all these impulses or points of reference that make up our 'being' (I am avoiding 'identity' because of its connections of being fixed). This is a process that each individual will have to go through by her/himself. There are no politicians, ministers of religion, professors or friends that should formulate new categories for us to arrange ourselves into. There are no more

referring to one set of values that conforms us all to one group. You can be a Christian capitalist, or a Christian Marxist, you can be a Christian, African capitalist or a Christian, African Marxist. You can even be African and Western at once. This may all seem very confusing. This is probably why Van Niekerk speaks of Africans with Western characteristics as schizophrenic. This is the reaction of someone raised within the modern paradigm, where clear-cut, fixed identities are seen as the norm.

But allow me to show you some reactions towards modernism from the perspectives of Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and others. Let us toy with the idea that we all are much more than our current modern categories allow us to be. Some may find this liberating, others will find it terrifying, but in my view this is a more responsible way to deal with the various impulses that make all of us 'moral bricoleurs'[This term will be explained in greater detail later on]. Suffice it to say that moral bricoleurs react to impulses from various value-systems that coincides in the particular individual in a kaleidoscopic way. The turn of the kaleidoscope causes various values to fall into a unique pattern in various episodic situations.

3. The second can of worms: identity without 'pure rationality' or 'group-pressure'.. who am I now?

Even though postmodernism has been criticised for being a umbrella term for all the reactions against the modernist paradigm, abused by some who plead relativism, and employed by late-modernists as a soft option to reform certain modernist institutions and practices, certain writers who can be described as using a post-modern vantage point posit some quite useful alternatives to modern essentialisms and stereotypical categorization. As a tool to dismantle fixed subjectivist meanings, categories and identities, postmodernism becomes liberating. Unto what it liberates us, remains to be seen. I believe that it could enable us to live without the limitations of subjectivism by engaging in a constant process of deconstruction, as well as constant, temporary reconstruction of episodic identities and values. It can liberate us to be more than our previous adherence to subjectivist categories allowed us to be by accepting difference, not only in others, but also in ourselves. It gives us the opportunity to embrace ambiguity, difference, contradictions and the courage to live with the insecurities, liberties and responsibilities it entails.

The tide has certainly turned to the detriment of the 'Enlightenment man' (sexism intended...), as Soskice (1994:14) depicts him: 'the cultureless, history-less, language-less actor on whose behalf universal moral prescriptives might be laid down'. There has been convincingly argued that there is no such thing as the 'unencumbered self'. Every self is encumbered and shaped by the mother-tongues we learn, the families and societies that we are born into, the histories that all these institutions have, as well as by our place and roles within them. The question remains however, how we should deal with the fact that every individual is the product of various historical, cultural, social etc influences. Should we follow MacIntyre(1985) and the Communitarians in taking the moral community as the basis of explaining the behaviour of the individual belonging to that community? I am going to argue that the type of Communitarian community MacIntyre suggests tends to function as yet another metanarrative, providing the individual with one set of rules and values which can hardly be sufficient for the diversity of situations he/she may encounter within the global village. But if the individual is neither the rational, unencumbered self, nor the product of distinct groups, *who* is he or she? Let us try and

eliminate certain options to see what we are left with.

3.1. Away with modernist essentialisms

I have already indicated the dangers of primarily using cultural communities as explanatory tool by citing an example from Van Niekerk's book. Various other writers have also indicated the dangers of various types of 'communities' being used as explanatory tools. Gill (1994:2) even argues that using the Christian community as comprehensive category tends to produce a theological understanding of churches as moral communities which underestimates the synchronic and diachronic plurality of Christian resources. Gender categories have also been criticised comprehensively. Various feminists have ascribed to Foucault's anti-essentialist views of sexuality as not being an innate or natural quality of the body, but rather a historically specific effect of the operations of different regimes of power on the body. Foucault's explanation of bio-power and the politics of the body has indicated that the discourses surrounding gender categories often serve very specific socio-political agendas. The same argument was made concerning categories of mental insanity versus sanity - often these categories are part of the social engineering process of government or other social institutions. People are often ostracized and discriminated against merely because they don't serve any social, political, or economical function. But what is the alternative to this?

McNay (1994:9) indicates that Foucault's ethics of the self is not oriented towards the recovery of an essential inner identity, but towards an exploration of a myriad of potential identities and ways of existing in the world. Foucault's critique of the constitutive subject of thought, developed during his archaeological phase, proclaims that there does not exist any prediscursive subject that can be located as the origin of meaning. The notion of an unified subject is an illusion generated through structural rules that govern discursive formations. The technique of archaeology - the disclosure of latent, deep-level structures that constitute the condition or possibility of all thought and speech - represents a powerful attack on the subjectivism of phenomenological and biographical approaches to intellectual history.

Pieterse (1996:55) indicates the immense contribution that the 'politics of difference' of Young, Rutherford, Soja, Hooper etc. makes to the postmodern debate. An important aim of the 'politics of difference' is the struggle for the broadening of numerous/multiple spaces to name, expose and challenge the socialised assumptions which enable to remain in power. Instead of claiming to have discovered identity or plurality politics, post-moderns indicate that 'identities' are not fixed or static. As Pieterse (1996:57) puts it:

'Even the obvious ones (identities) such as race, gender and sexuality are profoundly ambiguous, unstable and fluid. Anti-essentialism in terms of identity politics is critical to avoid simplistic and dichotomous understandings about groups.'

Post-modern radicalism constitutes an attempt at transcending engraved essentialisms of modernist-identity politics. It visualises a world in which multiple subjects with many, changeable identities are located in varying (also changeable) subject positions.

Many critics of the above aspects of the postmodernist approach to identity and ethics indicate the relativism and flux of this way of life as unliveable. I however believe that this life-style and mind-set could be a very liveable alternative in a pluralist society such as South Africa. As Pieterse (1996:61) argues - it will not only challenge Christians in South Africa to humility and modesty, but it will also enable all South African to become

translators and negotiators. The aim of this essay is to indicate how this mind-set could be of value in South Africa's pluralist work-place, strewn with ambiguities, complexity and conflict.

3.2. Away with metanarratives and the ideal of consensus

The communitarian solution of Alasdair MacIntyre rests on the important assumption that a homogenous moral community at local level is indeed possible. Such a community will for instance be an impossible ideal in the context of a pluralistic South African working environment. The communitarian viewpoint of close links existing between narrative, community and ethics should however be taken seriously. Whether this would inevitably lead us to the search for a common moral language, an 'Esperanto' that could serve as a new metanarrative, is however doubtful. The reason for this being that metanarratives can be seen as yet another attempt to subject reality to a comprehensive set of human explanations and categories. In Lyotard's works, *'The Inhuman'* and *'The Postmodern Explained'*, it becomes clear that Lyotard wants to warn us against this will to power so inherent in human beings. He argues that the human subject's desire to control by making everything representable, undermines the true humanity of the human race. Our true humanity only becomes possible if we allow ourselves to be confronted by the 'inhuman', or in other words, that which transcends us.

In the context of morality this brings us to the recognition that value-systems also run the risk of functioning as certain legitimizing narratives, closing off a certain subjectivist interpretation of how things are and how things should be. If this narrative cannot be challenged by other narratives, it could easily become a manner of legitimizing the existing power configurations. Lyotard does not pretend that we can survive without any narratives, since narratives are our way of making sense of our lives and our relationships. He only urges that we should never allow any one narrative to become a subjectivist prison from which no escaping towards transcendence is possible. We should allow the plurality of narratives to challenge and shape one another, even if this causes a certain measure of uncertainty. Lyotard(1991:98) will argue that this uncertainty constitutes the essence of true humanity, since it indicates an awareness of something bigger and greater than our own attempts at meaning and representation.

To indicate cultural communities as the narrative structure from which all actions should be explained, would be to create a metanarrative that continuously subjects the 'other' to our own explanatory tools, with distortions being the obvious result. In my view each individual belongs to many episodic 'communities', with various different discourses in which value-systems must be brought into play. Interdependent value-creation will have to deal with moral dissensus in a pluralistic context. Consensus, even locally, would be the wrong expectation. Plurality should rather be seen as a positive resource in value creation. Instead of overcoming discomfort with differences by discarding plurality, Streng's (1993) assumption is that differences are significant and that the necessity to consider these differences informs the manner in which moral communities develop. As Streng (1993:93) puts it:

'Only by taking the present conflicts and differences seriously can we develop the character dispositions, the 'virtues,' including the intellectual and emotional skills, to handle the 'otherness' of other people.'

Because the information revolution has made us all neighbours in a shrinking world,

we must deal with differences and conflicts through a sensitivity other than the dichotomizing flight-or-fight mentality. We must allow difference to infuse each situation and when consensus ensues episodically, we must refrain from embodying this temporary consensus into a new local consensus that must necessarily guide all the following episodes.

4. Are there viable alternatives to all these cans of worms?

Postmodernism is often accused of deconstructing and thereby undermining human attempts to make the world comprehensible and liveable, without replacing it with some other suggestions on how to handle the problems of the human condition. In order to make some viable suggestions regarding the problem of moral dissensus in pluralistic societies, I would like to suggest a intersubjective strategy of *unapologetic dialogue*. 'Unapologetic' must be understood in two ways - as being witness of a person's own religious, cultural, political (etc.) values without making any excuses for one's beliefs and viewpoints, but it must also be understood as being unapologetic in the sense of not engaging in the discipline of apologetics. One should not be pitting all emotional and rational powers against some other set of values or beliefs. Religions and cultures should no longer be seen as competing value-systems, but rather as ways in which a pluralistic society can be infused with mutually enriching perspectives on morality. As Streng (1993:97) argues:

'...once we allow conceptions of selfhood, and procedures for self-consciously identifying authentic selfhood, other than those given in our immediate cultural context, we can appreciate alternative modes of actualizing an authentic self.'

Unapologetic dialogue thus promotes inter-subjectivity, but distances itself from the communitarian ideal of consensualist common values. Jacobson (1995:357) indicates the need to de-centre rationality and to dislocate modernity by a non-traditional understanding of cross-cultural (and in my opinion, cross-sexual, cross-political, cross-religious etc.) interaction. Maria Lugones's concept of 'world-travelling' provides a possible starting point. World-travelling implies an alternative vision of both individual subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. The plurality of worlds in a multi-cultural society leads to a plurality of identities which persons animate in various worlds. This may then lead to the dissolution of a completely coherent self-narrative (or identity) into an ambiguous and internally multiplicitous set of narratives (or identities). This multiplicity and ambiguity opens new moral possibilities by allowing for resistance to otherwise reified categories and structures of domination within and among worlds (Jacobsen 1995:358).

We should thus engage in a process of self-awareness and the realization of the self-transcending 'other'. Here Derrida's (1981) theory of *deconstruction* is helpful in understanding what can be achieved by my notion of unapologetic dialogue. He(1981:12) describes the benefits of the 'general strategy of deconstruction' as follows:

'The latter [the general strategy of deconstruction] is to avoid both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of oppositions, thereby confirming it'.

By being confronted by other understandings of virtue in other religions and cultures, our own moral viewpoints must be put on the table unapologetically, but with the openness to allow other moral viewpoints to deconstruct our own. Deconstruction should

not be understood as the total dismantling of our morality, but as an opportunity to understand the limited nature of all subjective value-systems, thereby making self-transcendence possible. What is required is the willingness to expose the depth of one's own convictions while recognizing the depth - if not accepting the formulations - of another person's convictions. In this context judging authentic virtue appropriate for individuals in a global community is a matter of developing skills in learning, cultivating 'taste', evaluating, and placing specific events in perspective. Streng (1993:100) indicates the value of this approach:

'The difference between this kind of cultivation and what we earlier called an 'imperial' incorporation of strangers into an essentialist normative tradition is that the skill development, the cultivation of character dispositions, requires multiple experiences within oneself and among people.'

Stout (1988:293) describes a *moral bricoleur* as someone who makes a selective reappraisal and an eclectic reconfiguration of traditional linguistic elements in the hope of solving the moral issue at hand. Stout uses the Wittgensteinian family-concept in reference to various types of moral reasoning. Through engaging in dialogue with other moral traditions, we are enabled to recognise something of the relations of one family of moral language in another tradition. Often our moral language are made up of various fragments. We for instance combine elements of our religious value-systems, such as obedience to God, with cultural and political value-systems such as an ethic of rights. Thus I would like to employ Stout's term 'the moral bricoleur' as the moral agent that, after being exposed to various value-systems and after being exposed to the 'Other' through unapologetic dialogue, draws on the unique configuration of value making up his/her web of beliefs. In my opinion morality in the workplace depends on this day-to-day discourse which is the sphere in which individuals' configuration of values comes into interaction with other individuals' configuration. In the inter-subjective process the kaleidoscope is turned and the *moral bricoleurs* unconsciously changes his/her configuration by episodically making use of all the various value systems that make up his/her configuration. In certain episodes the individual may for example make use of both western and African values, combining these with capitalist and feminist values to address the need of the specific episode. In another episode economic or political values will be underplayed whilst the cultural and the sexual may function stronger.

The idea of the moral bricoleur implies a move away from foundationalism towards a neo-pragmatic way of dealing with moral decision-making. The main objection to neo-pragmatism is the perception that it promotes relativism. Reeder (1993:193) however argues that neo-pragmatism agrees with relativism that there are no ahistorical foundations, but that it insists, contrary to relativism, that the building blocks of moral systems are not arbitrary. Both foundationalism and relativism make the mistake of assuming that we reason solely from general principles or criteria to more specific judgements. On the neo-pragmatist account general principles or criteria do not require any justification independent of their relation to specific judgement, because justification consists of a dialectic between judgements in specific cases and the application of generalizations to new cases in the light of which the generalizations themselves are modified. The neo-pragmatist will also deny that moral systems are conceptual schemes into which we are locked to such an extent that it is impossible to translate or understand other moral systems. Reeder (1993:194) argues that given the possibility of the enrichment of our own moral language through the process of learning another scheme as

a new language, it is always possible, although often difficult, to achieve understanding. We should thus not hope for a moral Esperanto as a moral vocabulary that will replace our diverse and particular moralities, but rather hope for partial agreements and not for widely shared justifications. It is important to realize that neo-pragmatism does not rule out the search for grounds for our most general beliefs. It also allows for certain universals as a basis for understanding. Neo-pragmatism appreciates the degree to which we live in particular and diverse webs of meaning. This is why neo-pragmatism is a helpful perspective on how a *moral bricoleur* can make moral decisions.

5. The 'can do': Moral bricoleurs in South African pluralistic organisations

I would like to argue that in South Africa a moral agent can hardly be anything but a *moral bricoleur*. In South Africa we are confronted with so many cultures, religions and economic inclinations that each person's moral character should be a very unique configuration of values, beliefs, relationships and economic inclinations. For instance, the only way in which one could remain a stereotyped white, male, Dutch Reformed capitalist (which of course already includes quite a few variations) is to live in complete isolation. Though this may be the choice of some of our fellow citizens, it will certainly become problematic within the context of a large pluralistic organisation in South Africa.

The problem is that many professionals that were raised in a western, capitalist culture are still functioning within the impoverished moral culture of the 'rational moral agent'. Park's (1993:190) study of moral attitudes of 90 MBA-students indicated that they can only take into consideration the individual, the individual corporation and the individual nation. They do not as readily recognize the social-ecological-political fabric within and upon which individual organisms and organisations must dwell and depend. They cannot recognize the dynamic relationships among sectors of society that constitute the rich interdependence that they are subject to and that they will shape. Especially in the pluralistic organisational environment of South African companies, the interdependency of various groups upon one another should be recognized. The impact of the company on various other systems is also of extreme importance for the reconstruction of the South African society.

What Parks (1993:178) suggests is that we encourage the replacement of individualism with more communal, interdependent convictions. She argues that this become possible if we can broaden the imaginations of people in the working environment. Virtue is predicated on purpose, image and imagination. People should be brought to realize the scope of their power in a profoundly interdependent world. To enlarge the moral imagination, we should offer people an initiation into complexity and ambiguity, we should create situations in which the individual is confronted with the 'other', and where previous clear-cut guidelines are deconstructed. This process becomes possible within a pluralistic working environment such as is found in South African organisations.

Van der Merwe (1994:195) challenges us to use postmodernism as a tool with which to dismantle from within the architecture of the ethnic, socio-cultural and intellectual diversity of our social reality in South Africa, thereby uncovering the uses and abuses of symbolic forms of meaning(s) in the service of power. Different forms of ethnic and socio-cultural diversity should in Van der Merwe's view not be understood as self-enclosed, hermetically sealed off and isolated 'pockets' of human existence. Van der Merwe (1994:196) indicates that the process of intercultural communication and cross-

cultural assimilation need not lead us to the affirmation of dissensus, but that it rather occasion continuous challenges to self-critical and self-reflective examination and purification of the languages through which the 'other' and the self are understood. This may lead to a shared discourse of mutual understanding. He quotes Taylor: 'This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both.' This common moral language will however in my opinion become yet another metanarrative if a certain perspective on rationality, for instance the discourse on rights, is used as exclusive evaluative measure. The understanding that is reached should rather acknowledge the various discourses involved, and the 'consensus' reached on values and actions forthcoming from this understanding should not create another subjective creation of timeless universals.

If this strategy is followed in terms of the interaction between people coming from various cultural orientations such as African, or western, the understanding resulting from unapologetic dialogue should not set a new universal standard that all people feel forced to adhere to. There could however be agreement on certain values that would be in the best interests of all involved to apply in a specific sphere, or for a specific episode, such as in the work-place or during a specific period. The possibility of individuals' value-systems to be drastically rearranged does exist. This rearrangement should not however function as a standard for how the process should be experienced by other individuals.

In the South African workplace a post-modern orientation does more than to prepare us for experiencing 'otherness' as something profoundly positive. It also undermines certain dualisms inherent to modernism, thereby enabling us to look beyond seeming contradictions. It deconstructs dualisms between rational and mythical, logic and rhetoric, concept and metaphor, argument and narrative etc - thereby freeing us from our prejudices against anything that cannot be explained or integrated within modernist rationality. This immediately questions the clear-cut distinction between African and western in terms of civilized-primitive, rational-mythical, secular-religious, intellectual-intuitive, individual-communal, scientific-magical, conscious-unconscious, made by many writers on the difference between western and African world view.

Setiloane (1987:54) indicates participation, belonging and community as central values of traditional African value-systems. The question is however, whether these values are not central to all individuals lives, and whether it is not due to modernist dichotomy that 'westerners' have been forced to push these values into the so-called private sphere? Often the value-systems created in religious, political and cultural communities formed the basis of the so-called 'autonomous' individual's moral decision-making. The false dichotomy between the private and the public has now been exposed, and inter-subjectivity allows individuals to bring impulses from all the various value-systems in play and to interact with other people and value-systems in the process of moral decision-making.

In Morgan's (1996:19) interview with sangoma Credo Mutwa it becomes clear that he sees the future of South African productivity as being directly related to the extent that employers succeed in being involved in their employees' lives and allowing them to participate in processes central to the organisation. This insistence upon employers caring for their employees in terms of quality of life and the involvement of people on all levels of the organisation, is not limited to the needs of 'Africans'. Human resource experts identified quality of life-programs as central to employer-employee relationships in

traditionally 'western' organisations as well. As soon as we can manage to look at certain important moral values without placing them in some or other cultural category, we will be able to reconstruct morality in the workplace.

The fact that a management consultant like Koopman (1991:61) identifies both certain valuable, as well as certain problematical elements in (his stereotyped version of) African value-systems, should no longer posit a threat. Both the valuable and the problematical aspects that he points out can indeed benefit the value-creation process in the organisation, since it will stimulate discussion and infuse the moral debate with new contents. One should also take into consideration that any value-judgement regarding valuable and problematical aspects is made from a very specific set of prejudices. We however should not expect that the value-creation process will be a quick fix that will assimilate all individuals into a seamless new metanarrative. The conflict arising from the dialogue is a very important part of value-creation, it could promote understanding if properly managed. Conflict should be a confrontation with and acceptance of other subjectivities, not a mere means to a consensualist end. The most important spin-off of the process is not the arrangements being made, but the way in which individuals practise differentiated moral reasoning.

One should perhaps see the new trends towards worker participation, quality of life programs, value-creation programs etc. as the culmination point of various value-systems being allowed to function in organisations. The political value-system of democracy, the marxist concerns for the labourer and material conditions in society, cultural and religious value-systems focusing on social responsibilities all play a role in the trends that are being manifested in organisations today. It is up to us to embrace these processes and to empower people to bring as much as possible resources for value-creation into the organisation. The 'African' perception of 'ubuntu', indicated by Pato (1997:59) as essential to Africans' integrity, should not be seen as 'the other', that now forces us to accommodate 'them' by making certain conciliations resulting in tokenism. It should challenge all in the organisation towards being inter-subjectively addressed by the value of this perspective. All will not embrace it, some may find a certain connection with it, others will realise that the desire to belong, to be because 'we' are, has been there all along.

In the context of South African organisations the emphasis on the control of the rational individual has also come under severe criticism as being sexist, racist and ahistorical in character. The more communal values of the stereotyped African culture seems to include aspects such as responsibility and care, as well as regard for community values and relationships with people in determining moral decision-making. It seems as if both the feminist critique of an exclusive male ethics of individual rights, as well as the communitarian critique on the rational individual as being a 'ghostly self' can be addressed by an greater openness towards communal values within the organisation. This communalism need not be a complete contradiction to individualism. As Schutte (1996:28) puts it:

'The truth is that we are both free and dependant on others. This is the paradoxical truth about human beings...'

Schutte (1996:30) indicates how African writers, like Senghor, try to indicate that Africans do not see the individual as merely a function of the community. The black society is based both on the community and the person. Because the community was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without

crushing him. Mulago is quoted by Schutte (1996:30) as indicating 'participation' as a special sense to denote the way in which the individual is seen to be belonging to the group:

'Participation is the element of connection which unites different beings as beings, as substances, without confusing them. It is the pivot of relationships between members of the same community, the link which binds together individuals and groups, the ultimate meaning not only of the unity which is personal to each man (person) but of that unity in multiplicity, that totality, that concentric and harmonic unity of the visible and invisible worlds.'

This emphasis on participation can be very helpful in pluralist organisations, since it promotes unapologetic dialogue and thereby understanding between people.

The interdependency aspect that results from Africa's strong orientation to collective values, and their collective sense of responsibility and care, shows that so-called 'African' moral reasoning certainly constitutes a seemingly viable alternative to the stereotyped rational individual of the modernist moral philosophy. But one cannot deny that black individuals in South African organisations can hardly be seen as completely adhering to the collective values of Africa, or that 'Westerners' have no collective impulses, desire for participation etc. South African organisations also exhibit a unique combination of 'Western' economic practices and efforts towards participating in the African Renaissance. Therefore we cannot hope that African collective values alone will lead us to the moral Esperanto some so urgently desire. What is however possible, is that African communalism can make a significant contribution to the value-system of an organisation, without necessarily excluding all Western elements.

6. Concluding thoughts

The overemphasis on the us-them, African-western, white-black categories of the past has kept morality in South Africa within the very strict confines of trying to deal with the 'Other' as justly as possible without doing too much damage to *our* own interests. And assessing 'justice' from the perspective of our own interests will necessarily lead to distortions. Being free from labels which classify our fellow South Africans as the 'Other' or the 'stranger', we will be able to do much more. We will be able not only to recognise some things of the 'Other' as aspects of ourselves, but also to enrich and expand our moral resources in order to deal with each situation in its own terms. Having to reinvent *the right thing to do* as we go along might undermine our securities, it might even make us feel at sea in certain circumstances, but it will make us earnest *moral bricoleurs*, grappling with the truth here and now.

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