Maturing workplace culture in the context of evolved ethical agency

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Abstract

Culture is a concept and a descriptor of concrete examples of cultures within which man stands as the embodiment and the maker of culture and morality. This presupposes he is a self-reflective agency capable of decision-making and with the capacity to act independently. Geertz described culture as a system of uniquely human controls, a consequence of which is that morality or ethics reasoning is fundamental to culture. Kohlberg outlines an invariant progress towards ethics reasoning in a universal context, passing though the early stages of reasoning; self-interest, group interests and rule-following. These earlier stages negate autonomous action in favour of heteronomy, a rationale based on internal and external constraints.

Workplace cultures are necessarily dynamic, comprising multiple agents continuously entering and departing the matrix. The safety aspect, often defined as "the way we do things", is substantially more and deeper than a simple behaviour pattern. It is the outworking of reasoning at all levels and the perception of agency by stakeholders. Culture and ethics are identical in this model and in identifying cultural maturity the authors found that maturity is evolved cultural/ethical agency, simultaneously transpersonal and interpersonal.

The authors' ethics reasoning research with undergraduates on the BSc Quantity Surveying programme found the level of reasoning necessary for independent decision-making lower than expected and that students' actions were guided by heteronomous reasoning that is at best morally ambiguous and at worst capable of lending itself to workplace practices that sacrifice safety for profit. Expanding the work of Kohlberg and Eckensberger this paper develops the ethics reasoning research, linking it to culture and the maturity levels of individuals and organisations to illustrate the efficacy of formal intervention to develop the cultural and ethical maturity of professionals and the positive affect on their occupations.

Keywords: Workplace Culture, Ethics Reasoning, Maturity.

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Introduction

Globally the construction industry has a reputation that generally falls well below what can reasonably be called ethical, being as it is an environment where competition between contractors leads to a low price mentalities, fierce competition and paper-thin margins and thus to quality and safety reductions to cut costs and save time, (Hamzah Abdul-Rahman et al. 2007, 2010). Hamzah et al (2007, 2010) summarised research in Australia and South Africa that identified several unethical conducts and ethical dilemmas in the construction industry such as; corruption, negligence, bribery, conflict of interest, bid cutting, under bidding, collusive tendering, cover pricing, frontloading, bid shopping, withdrawal of tender, and payment game. In 2003 the Cole Royal Commission (cited in McCarthy 2012) reported on a general disregard for the law in the construction and building industry and the Building Industry Task Force in 2005 and 2006 reported that the "industry remains plagued by a culture of civil disobedience, coercion, intimidation, threatening behaviour, and the contempt for the law". Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), however refuted the Cole Commission process as being contrary to natural justice and the particular assertions of 'thuggery',on the part of workers in the industry (Roberts 2003).

Some four years into the global recession in which construction has suffered badly as a result of the cancellation or suspension of major infrastructure projects, negative equity housing and the banks calling in of loans from small contractors, competition and reduced margins remain a central feature of a landscape in which the International Labour Organisation (ILO) World Congress on Occupational Safety and Health [Seoul 2008] predicted that such a climate would have a direct negative impact on the safety and welfare of workers as employers sought to minimise losses to the bottom line (McAleenan and McAleenan, 2010). It is this latter aspect of the industry's culture, it's "safety culture" where workers face the risk of harm, that had become the focus of attention of those working in the field of occupational safety and health.

A range of approaches have being adopted to manipulate that culture to achieve improved outputs in safety compliance, reduced accidents and a positive safety leadership from senior management and board teams. However the issue is problematic, not least because there is no universally accepted definition regarding what constitutes a "safety culture", much less what it should look like.

Culture

A common phrase used to explain safety culture is "it is the way we do things here"; but this is simplistically inadequate in that it describes no more than the subjective actions of workers in the workplace without consideration of the contexts in which that work occurs and the motivations of the workers to perform in that manner. It is fundamentally a behaviourist approach without an appreciation of the character of the individual workers, their system of motivations which underlies but is not identical with their behaviour, (Freud cited in Fromm 1947). Thus to an observer looking at a site where work is apparently being carried out in compliance with safety procedures, he cannot, without deeper analysis, determine whether he is observing a "safety culture" or merely a momentary culture of work being done safely,

of safety being an incidental output of other motivations. Geertz (1973) refers to this basic statement of what is happening as a Thin description of culture. Culture is not just about behaviours, though conscious behaviours are a cultural phenomena. Freire (1973) has described culture as man's transformation of nature by his work. This transformation is the outworking of a conscious relationship with the world in which man "organises himself, chooses the best response, tests himself, acts and changes himself in the act of responding".   He is both in the world and of the world.   In this there is a dialectical relationship in which man is both the embodiment of culture and the maker of culture, a duality that negates definitions of culture as abstract matrices in which man merely moves.

Geertz (1973) described culture as a system of uniquely human controls. A consequence of this is that morality, which embodies controls, and ethics reasoning, which informs a rational understanding of what man should or should not do, are fundamental to culture and, following Freire, this presupposes that man is a self-reflective agency capable of decision-making and with the capacity to act independently. Geertz's (1973) thick description of culture is that there is a duality between the manifestations of culture, which he describes as signs and symbols to which meaning must be assigned, and man's interpretation and application of meaning to those symbols. This leads to a position whereby culture is not only uniquely human, but is unique to each human in that each person experiences and interprets culture for himself. What appears to the casual observer to be a shared culture, whether at the level of society or of sub-groups such as workplaces, is in fact a synthesis of multiple manifestations of culture that below the level of the observed is a permanent dynamic that objectively gives meaning to the observed phenomena.

This observed workplace culture is itself also necessarily dynamic, comprising multiple agents continuously entering and departing the matrix, each bringing new interpretations, abstracting from and assigning different meanings to the environment in which they are working. Thus contrary to the idea that culture is shared it is more appropriate to consider culture as being experienced and evolving in a shared place that leads to similar but non-identical responses to the phenomena of work.

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Morality and ethics reasoning

Culture and morality are inseparable (Lemburger 2011) and man as a moral agent is by definition self-reflective and autonomous (Körner 1995, citing Kant). The function of morality/ ethics is that it is concerned with guiding behaviour such that at a fundamental level that behaviour is non-injurious to others and in its more evolved forms it actively contributes to the good of others (Fromm 1947). This distinction illustrates a differentiation between a morality that is mandatory, "you must not harm others", and thus an absolute negation of autonomous agency, and one that is desirable but ultimately non-obligatory, "you should do good", a partial recognition but not full acceptance of autonomy. Reconciling this apparent contradiction is a necessary prerequisite to holding that each is accountable for their actions (Eckensberger 2007). Hegel held that freedom of the will is the appreciation of necessity; that is the capacity to make decisions with the knowledge of the subject (Engels 1894). For Engels (1984) this consisted in man's control over himself and of external nature, a control founded on natural necessity and emerges as a result of historical development. Jean Piaget and later Lawrence Kohlberg (Partington 1997) explored the development of moral reasoning in children and young people to understand how their moral choices were arrived at. Piaget saw two distinct stages of heteronomous or constrained morality and autonomous reasoning that takes place within a social context. Kohlberg's advanced Piaget's work (Crain 1985) and his stages of development of ethics reasoning commences with pre-conventional reasoning amongst young children informed by fear of punishment then of self-interest.

Conventional moral reasoning stems from tribal/ group and latterly societal conformity. Post conventional reasoning is based at the penultimate stage on the recognition of universal rights and abstract moral principals and at the ultimate level morality is based on the recognition and acceptance of equal existence of all living beings. Rules for moral behaviour are no longer necessary as the dignity of each individual is given due consideration, in all circumstances (Coverston n.d.). In this we see the transition from constrained moral choices to autonomous decision making, albeit not until the highest stage is arrived at.

Eckensberger developed Kohlberg's stages from 6 to 11 in four levels (Crain 1985). He introduced two social interpretation spheres, interpersonal defined by concrete interactions with concrete persons and transpersonal, determined by functions and roles. As a level of maturity the latter is indicative of the moral agent reasoning beyond personal considerations towards universal principals, where-as the former necessitates empathy and reciprocal respect and is akin to the ultimate stage identified by Kohlberg. Criticism of Piaget and Kohlberg's theories (Partington 1997) centre on their position that moral reasoning develops in an invariant sequence (across all cultures) and once a level of reasoning is attained is irreversible. Partington (1997) illustrates the negation of non-reversibility by reference to societies that have degenerated from more enlightened periods into fascistic and totalitarian states ultimately leading in some cases to the end of that society. He also holds that the universality of the theory is not supported when one considers other cultures where non-rational philosophies are dominant. His former point is in error in that he has conflated the coherent consciousness of the individual with the dialectical interrelationship of multiple consciousnesses that make up society. The fact that the dominant forces in a society reason at an immature stage compared with less dominant members does not nullify the theory but in his error has exposed the dichotomy between the maturity of individuals and the maturity of the group or groups to which they belong.

Cultural maturity in organisations

McAleenan and McAleenan (2009) have been developing an analytical process for determining with a high degree of accuracy the cultural maturity of organisations. A number of core criteria are identified that are considered in their totality, the absence of one or more of which will severely impair the company's sustainability in times of economic crises and which have a negative impact on its ability to remain viable relative to competitors in times of economic stability. The criteria are Corporate Social Responsibility, Innovativeness, Resourcefulness and Autonomous Decision-making Units. Notwithstanding the OECD (2004) Principles of Corporate Governance requiring corporations to conduct their business with financial integrity and in a manner that respects their key stakeholders interests, it is an indicator of cultural and moral maturity that businesses no less than individuals act morally and from optimum levels of reasoning. The fact that some businesses do not act in this fashion is not a negation of the integrity and maturity of the many individuals that comprise that business at any given point. The dominant forces in a business are the owners and shareholders. Their experience and interpretation of cultural manifestations are as unique as those of employees but with the added qualifier that their decisions and actions carry a force that outweighs those of "subordinates". The worker is constrained by the decision making authority of the employer and those he appoints to manage on his behalf. This negates the

fourth criteria, that the organisation recognises and supports the decision making capacity of autonomous agency within the workforce.

Though required to balance self-interest with social interests, it appears counterintuitive to employer and employee alike, that this should be the case in workplaces, hence the activities of workers are determined by external as well as internal constraints. It does not follow that the requirements of the employer are followed unthinkingly or in agreement, thus pronouncements to work safely are interpreted individually in the context of time pressures, perceptions of employers, budgetary constraints and a host of other cultural signs in the environment. Kohlberg's (cited in Crain 1985) and Eckensberger's (2007) stages of moral development are universal (at least within the culture where they were developed) and applicable to all individuals. By this rationale employers and their agents are capable of attaining those highest stages of universal moral principals that support the universal rights of all. However research conducted from the 1950s into the biological roots of ideology was summarised in 2003 in the paper "Political conservatism as motivated social cognition", (Psychological Bulletin vol.129, p339, cited in Graham and Estes 2012). It "*concluded that some of the defining aspects of conservative ideology - resistance to change and justification of inequality - were motivated by deep seated psychological needs to manage uncertainty and threat*". It follows that as uncertainty increases, as in the present economic conditions, so too will the resistance to change and the justification of inequality.

Though less well researched a liberal ideology is defined by such characteristics as open-minded, creativity and curiosity. The world is not polarised into these two ideological positions, it is much more complex with individuals holding ideological positions that are more conservative on some matters and more liberal in others, for example libertarians may tend to economic conservatism but be socially liberal. Nor is it a question of either position being necessarily false. However these ideological difference extend to moral judgements with liberals more likely to be offended by inequalities and suffering and conservatives by betrayal of in-group disrespect for authority and tradition, (Graham and Estes 2012). Businesses, particularly large corporations which are influential on smaller companies, are structured along and succeed as a result of conservative practices. The organisational structure defines the roles and responsibilities of managers, defines the relative status and norms of behaviour of staff and line functionaries, mechanisms and processes for allocation of resources and in general sets the rule for the game (Ghoshal and Bartlett 1995). Those most likely to rise in the business world are those whose world view is conservative, at least in the sphere of economics.

Conversely in times of uncertainty it is these qualities of the business and those who run them that are least suited to effecting the necessary changes that will meet the challenges they face, thus many companies have failed during times of economic crises. McAleenan and McAleenan (2010) in exploring strategies for success found that though they may be successful, to a point, they are fundamentally flawed in that when circumstances change or new conditions manifest themselves the strategies will fail. What was required was evolution on an ability to develop novel strategies, and this it appears lies with those of a liberal ideological root, that is [ordinarily] those who are not at the helm of organisations. An illustration of the point is Semco (Semler 1999), a large company facing closure during

Brazil's recession in the 1980s. Semler (1999) was given the business by his father and brought to it a more liberal agenda developed in an unconventional youth. As a result of the radical ways in which he restructured the company and the autonomy he recognised and encouraged, Semco was one of the success stories of that period made possible by the innovativeness and resourcefulness of his workforce.

Conclusion

McAleenan and McAleenan (2011, 2012) have been developing programmes with undergraduate design students that are aimed at developing their stages of ethical reasoning, a critical aspect of their professional development/ personal maturity, in preparation for their eventual management and/ or control of companies operating in the construction field and beyond. The success of a company, whether it is in economic terms or in meeting its social obligations to those who work for the company, is dependant upon the company achieving cultural maturity levels akin to the optimum levels of ethical reasoning developed by Kohlberg (Crain 1985) and Eckensberger (2007).

Culture is a poorly understood concept within the safety profession, who tend towards viewing it as a concrete object-in-itself capable of manipulation to achieve particular ends; e.g. improved performance and zero accidents. However this tendency is not an amenable conceptionalization of culture to shed meaningful insight into the ills of the construction industry (Gajendran et al 2012). Culture is the context in which man exists, no less so in the workplace than in society at large. The individual will interpret cultural manifestations, behaviours, institutions, instructions and so in, and respond in his own unique fashion, even within the constraints imposed by the circumstances. Though superficially it may appear that many are responding identically, fundamentally that is not the case. Programmes that enhance the ethics reasoning of professionals, those who will be influential in the organisation and running of businesses are a pre-requisite to the development of ethical and cultural maturity of companies. Integral to this is the need to recognise, value and thus support the autonomy of workers and managers without which there can be no mature agency.

As the research and programme development at student level progresses the next phase is to design research programmes to assess the transformational potential of the maturer reasoning professional on their professions and the companies they work for.

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