

'Where Is Your "F"?: Psychological Testing, Communication and Identity Formation in a Multinational Corporation

Sigrid Damman

ABSTRACT: The article is based on multi-sited fieldwork in a multinational corporation, where psychological tests were used extensively to facilitate communication and human resource development. The analysis indicates that the test effects were more complex than intended. Their application may be considered as a form of audit that was both individualizing and totalizing. While socio-cultural negotiations reached a level with new common reference points, attention was diverted away from important aspects of the socio-cultural context. Individuals were quick to struggle and assert themselves through the categories of the tests, but at the same time the room for diverse, independent articulations of identity at work seemed to be diminishing. In other words, the application of the tests may have opened some discursive fields, but narrowed others, thus contributing to a form of generification (Errington and Gewertz 2001) and entification (Zubiri 1984) of work identities. These observations give reason to question and continue exploring the effects of psychological typologies in corporate settings.

KEYWORDS: audit, communication, HRM and psychological testing, management, organizational culture, work identity

Introduction

Some form of personnel testing is almost universal in industry (cf. Iversen et al. 1999; AMA Survey 2001; Frieswick 2004). The internationalization of education and movement of larger numbers of international managers have also led to an increase in cross-cultural assessments (Sparrow 1999). According to their advocates (cf. Ringstad and Ødegård 1999; Northouse 2004), the tests may facilitate a positive development of work relationships, and identify leadership and communication preferences in a way that may enhance productivity. But how do the tests function in particular cases? What do we actually know about the practices that evolve around their use?

In this article, I will look into the use of psychological tests in one particular business corporation and discuss some of its effects on internal communication and identity construction. Basically, I will approach the practice surrounding the testing as a form of audit, where individuals are accounted for and made visible to each other in previously unprecedented ways. Reflecting along this line, I see the use of psychological tests as introducing a particular set of 'structures of common difference' (Wilk 1995). By conceptualizing fluid social influences and reactions in terms of more stable traits and distinctions, the use of the tests involved a process of entification (Zubiri 1984) or 'solidification' of identities that helped actors structure their experiences in a certain way.

However, the tests were also associated with a form of social control, in that attention was drawn away from complex socio-cultural negotiations and onto individual therapies. In so doing, the practice surrounding the tests could also be seen as ‘dividing’ (Foucault 1991), in a vein similar to that which others (Shore and Wright 2000) have proposed for other forms of audit. Finally, the test machinery not only construed differences in rather uniform ways, but along ultimately numeric scales. This raises certain questions regarding the conceptualization and evaluation of individual and cultural uniqueness in contemporary work settings. To what extent is diversity highlighted and maintained through psychological testing? Are particular identities cherished and developed on their own terms, or do we see a gradual ‘unitisation’ (Larsen 2005) of selves?

Psychological Testing as a Form of Audit

Basically, audit can be defined as an independent examination of, and expression of opinion on, the financial statements of an economic body (Power 1997). Since the 1980s, however, the word ‘audit’ has been used in a great variety of contexts. According to Shore and Wright (2000), the essence of its many usages today is a public inspection of some kind. Power (1997: 5) finds that the most general conceptual ingredients of audit are: independence from the matter being audited; technical work in the form of evidence gathering and examination of documentation; the expression of a view based on this evidence; and a clearly defined object of the audit process. A psychological test, on the other hand, is commonly defined as a measurement instrument with three key characteristics (Murphy and Davidshofer 1991):

1. It makes a sample of behaviour.
2. The sample is obtained under standardized conditions.
3. There are established rules for scoring

or for obtaining quantitative (numeric) information from the behaviour sample.

Like audit, psychological testing may be seen as a form of monitoring or account giving. In both cases, information is extracted and sorted in a rigorous way, and subsequently used to express an independent, seemingly neutral opinion on the study object. Although it is not spelled out, both techniques also have an evaluative aspect, in so far as objects are presented in terms of standardized concepts and scales that make them commensurable.

As forms of social action, psychological testing and audit have even more in common. According to Flint (1988) audit is demanded when agents expose principals to ‘moral hazards’ by potentially acting against their interests, and to ‘information asymmetries’ because they know more than the principals. Thus, audit may be seen as a risk reduction practice, which benefits the principal by inhibiting the value-reducing actions by agents (Power 1997: 5). This might also be said about the use of psychological tests, whose aim is to predict behaviour and, within a corporate setting, to ensure that human resources are managed in a way that optimises the interests of the firm.

Ultimately, it has been claimed, audit can be understood as a political technology: a supposed ‘self-empowerment’ is resting on the simultaneous imposition of external control and internalization of new norms (Shore and Wright 2000). As we shall see below, this again is a perspective that might be fruitful when it comes to corporate use of psychological tests. It is important, though, to distinguish between the normative and operational elements of both practices. As Power (1997) notes, any practice may be characterized as having both programmatic and technological elements. The former refers to the level of ideas and concepts that shape its mission. The technological elements, on the other hand, are the operational bedrock of tasks, routines and methods whereby the practice is materialized.

For Power, this distinction mainly serves to explain the pervasiveness of audit as an idea, but I am concerned with it for another reason: as technology, the psychological testing in the studied corporation had a social impact that in some respects was different from or went beyond its mission. It seemed to function, in Latour's (1991) sense, as an 'actant' of its own. Considering this background, I wonder if Shore and Wright's perspective on audit as an instrument of government is a little too narrow. As we shall see below, its technology, including language and concepts, may constitute reality in a more active sense than the word 'instrument' implies.

The Corporation in Question

The corporation whose practice I will discuss is a medium-sized supplier to the car industry. Auto Ltd, as I shall call it here, is a Norwegian-owned multinational with production in 12 different countries. The organization has expanded rapidly in recent years, and has seen a shift from a fairly stable and culturally homogenous stock of workers to a more fluctuating and heterogeneous staff. Much of the production at Auto Ltd consists of minute assembly work, where the speed and competence of individual workers is a critical production factor. As more generally in the automotive business, the just-in-time principle and international dispersion of production chains means that coordination is of paramount importance. At the same time, work situations are constantly changing: production processes are shifted between units in different countries and modified to meet customer requirements. There are regular organizational changes to keep the administration as lean and effective as possible and managers are often transferred between sites.

Against this background, the central management was much concerned with integration and communication. Inspired by Japanistic production ideologies,¹ they were working to

establish a shared corporate culture that they wanted to see incorporated by all Auto managers and employees. A 'rational-analytic' approach to management, discipline and respect were key elements in the value base the management had defined. However, there had also been recent efforts to develop a 'softer' side, where interpersonal care and tolerance was emphasized.

I followed Auto Ltd mainly over five years, from 2001 to 2005. My engagement with the corporation was part of a multidisciplinary research project, based on participant observation and 180 qualitative interviews with employees and managers at production sites in six different countries. One thing about Auto Ltd that struck me from an early stage was the great emphasis placed on psychological tests. In particular, the management expressed a strong belief in one personality test – the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The test itself was widely applied, and the terms and letters representing key dimensions in the Myers-Briggs inventory were frequently used, both by managers and employees. Sometimes they seemed to be taken for granted. At other times, they formed part of joking remarks, such as 'why don't you get a bit more introvert?' if somebody was dominating, or – as in the title of this article – 'where is your "F" (for feeling) ...?', when someone was not very empathetic.

I wondered what this did to processes of communication and identity construction in Auto Ltd, or what it might say about the practice evolving around the use of MBTI and other tests in the corporation. In what follows, I will explore this question, by discussing more empirical material and subsequently relating it more closely to the audit concept outlined above.

Psychological Testing at Auto Ltd

MBTI was brought to Auto Ltd in 1992 when a newly hired manager started applying it

within the unit he was heading. By 1996, the same leader was appointed as a human resource manager for the whole corporation. One of the first things he did was introduce Myers-Briggs on a grander scale. According to his statement, this was important to help employees increase their understanding of themselves and others. The reason why he landed on MBTI rather than other instruments was, in part, pragmatic: the former was a system he was familiar with and had been authorized to administer earlier in his career.

Still, a more important reason was that Myers-Briggs was considered one of the most 'solid' alternatives: MBTI is the most commonly used personality assessment in contemporary business life (Frieswick 2004). It also presents itself as scientific and objective, as opposed to tests where results are determined via the subjective interpretations of a psychologist. Even if the theories underlying MBTI are hardly scientific in a strict sense,² the test purports to render personality measurable and gives the impression that social interaction can be analyzed in a context-independent way.

MBTI takes the form of a written exercise, supposedly normalized when it comes to influences from gender, education, class and culture. Through multiple-choice questions, a person's inclinations and preferences are measured along four basic scales with opposite poles:

- extroversion/introversion
- sensate/intuitive
- thinking/feeling
- judging/perceiving

A combination of these characteristics is used to classify the person as one out of sixteen possible personality 'types', denoted by four letters. For example, a person may be defined as an INTJ – someone who is introvert and intuitive, thinking and judging. The various types are described in detail in a vast array of materials from the test-producer and a related 'team role questionnaire' is available as well.³

At the time of the study, all managers and supervisors were supposed to take the MBTI at least once. Unless anybody objected, the results were used in interactive management training. Test results were also used as a basis for individual coaching, and there was the option that one might retake the test and get a profile that reflected one's 'true' self to a greater extent.

The terminology and perspective behind the inventory was further presented and repeated in higher-level training courses, and in other seminars and meetings, where the success of the corporation was related to 'getting the right people on the bus' and using them optimally through a 'strong' company culture. Because the authorization explicitly discourages it, Myers-Briggs was not used directly for recruitment and selection. Still, the inventory was used indirectly for these purposes as well. 'I keep thinking it,' one recruitment officer said, referring both to his manner of classifying candidates and that he was concerned not to let a personal match or mismatch influence decision-making. When distribution of team roles and promotions were concerned, the situation was more or less the same: tests were influential as the source of most of the concepts and classifications that framed evaluations.

'It [Myers-Briggs] is part of our language,' one of the managers explained, and 'always on the table'. According to the human resource manager, the terminology associated with the MBTI had been 'used almost to the point of exaggeration'. At the same time, the management had made it a point to be open about the tests and their use. Tenopyr (1981) suggests that a common problem in corporate use of psychological tests is that they are administered without having an impact on major personnel decisions or any other use value that is visible to employees. In this case, however, the human resource management kept stressing the extent to which they relied on the results.

This degree of transparency made the work of the human resource department recogniz-

able and concrete. Importantly, it also resonated with a more general trend in quality management: according to the international standard ISO9000, any organizational practice should and must be characterized by different, clearly demarcated processes, where actions are managed, documented and controlled in accordance with measurable aims (Furusten 1998). The transparent use of Myers-Briggs could, in other words, help legitimize the time and money spent on human resource management both internally and vis-à-vis external agents.

The Myers-Briggs profiles of individual top managers were widely known and referred to, both in public and in more informal settings. Unless they explicitly objected to it, those of others, too, were discussed openly. The idea was that this brought out diversity and would make the system more acceptable to employees. However, it could also seem to foster preconceived ideas as to who one's colleagues were and what behaviour patterns they possessed. Thus, it did seem to encourage some forms of action and communication at the expense of others. Sometimes this would benefit the corporation. In other situations it would seem to hinder development. Less room was left for spontaneity and openness in social situations and individuals were rendered open to scrutiny from others in ways that might not always suit their interests.

Judging from the company's internal discourse, it was also clear that some 'types' were considered as more apt leaders than others. The top managers were all presented as personalities with a strong extrovert and thinking orientation. A 'rational-analytic' form of leadership was a stated aim. If you were a 'typical' manager at Auto Ltd, or aspired to be, you should be high on rational-analytical characteristics, and low on 'F'. At the time of the study, a female with a high F-score was included in a local management team. However, this was presented as an 'experiment', permissible because the person was not to lead any

critical operation and because her unit was in a country associated with higher 'F's' than that of the central management. Generally, I was told, 'a manager in our company must be analytical, and in possession of a certain "drive".'

With time, the use of Myers-Briggs was supplemented with other tests, first and foremost with the so-called Insights Discovery System.⁴ This has similarities with MBTI, in that it too is based on Jung's classifications. However, colour, rather than letter combinations, is used to denote different personality types. According to the management at Auto Ltd, Insights is simpler to use than MBTI. Unlike the latter, it is also promoted as a recruitment tool, thus promising assistance to the human resource department in some of their most critical decisions.

In addition to Insights, a 'cultural assessment' test from Richard Lewis Communications was also introduced. Here, a person's values and beliefs are measured along a standard scale and subsequently held up against a profile deemed 'typical' for his or her national culture.⁵ This test was mainly used in seminars on intercultural communication.

According to the central management, these tests were all 'living things' within the corporation. Some even saw the tests, and Myers-Briggs in particular, as the reason why there were efforts to create a 'softer' culture within Auto Ltd: having a language to discuss them through was considered to make human issues more apparent and to render their role in the development of the company more visible than before. This broadening of perspective was reflected in the corporate ideology: towards the end of our study period, the pillar of rational-analytical leadership was complemented with a 'humanistic' one, emphasizing respect and interpersonal care and thus lending more value to the relational orientation associated with the previously mentioned 'F'.

On the other hand, the tests seemed to generate a discourse where both individuals and 'cultures' were increasingly understood in

terms of abstractly defined traits. As we shall see below, this had some problematic aspects.

Downstream Effects: Opening and Closure of Discursive Fields

Most employees I discussed the matter with were positive about the use of psychological tests. Quite a number stressed that they were sceptical at the outset but discovered that the test results fitted their own perceptions remarkably well. Many also said they found the classifications useful in teamwork, as a means to understand and bring out the best in their co-workers.

On the other hand, some associated the tests with an undesirable degree of ‘psychologization’ that made Auto Ltd ‘too soft’. In their eyes, they were ‘mostly empty, high-sounding phrases’, similar to ‘horoscopes and other stuff from women’s magazines’. Others openly resented being ‘pigeon-holed’, claiming it would be better if personnel development was in the hands of local leaders and more closely integrated with practical tasks.

Still, even people who were against the tests used their terminology to describe themselves and others. One sceptical unit leader also said he had a useful learning experience during management training, when others signalled that he tended to be dominant and insensitive. Since then, he tried hard to develop ‘some more F’. Another person, who got extremely ‘tired of this personality stuff’, clearly leaned on his classification as an extrovert. He commended a colleague for combining the same trait with task-orientation and a strong element of ‘T’ for thinking, but also saw this as the reason why cooperation problems tended to follow in his wake.

Sitting in on internal feedback sessions, I found that the language associated with the MBTI was strongly present: in more than half of the responses given, elements of this terminology were used. In one case, the session

started with a discussion on the form the feedback should take. One participant suggested that each message should be ‘sharp and short’, whereas others stressed the need to tread carefully to avoid misunderstanding and hard feelings. The form the group landed on was centred on the categories from Myers-Briggs. Apparently, these categories served as some kind of a compromise, in that they were fairly pointed, but at the same time considered neutral and objective.

As the session proceeded, all participants seemed to strive for balanced responses. Still, persons associated with much ‘F’, in that they were seen as sensitive, flexible and easy to relate to, were commended for these qualities, but strongly advised to get more task-oriented, tough and structured. Those seen to possess the latter qualities were hardly encouraged to make a complete change of orientation. The feedback seemed strongly geared towards the stated ideal in the corporation, and less concerned with realizing individual potentials.

At the same time, I saw a marked contrast between the focused, enthusiastic and almost competitive atmosphere in the feedback sessions and the attitude that seemed to prevail *outside* them. Here, the same people tended to joke about the whole feedback exercise and to tease each other about the characteristics attributed to them. In a similar vein, serious attention to the internal course leader was combined with elements of resistance, such as telling smiles, demonstrative sighs and yawning. In one case, a participant was actually scolded by the leader for such behaviours. These contradictions were first and foremost associated with the discussion around ‘F’, which both functioned as the key element in the joking and occasioned most visible uneasiness during the studied courses.

In my eyes, this indicates that the management development efforts built around MBTI and the other mentioned tests, and in particular the ‘F’, were problematic. The desire for ‘F’, symbolized through a recently created ‘hu-

manistic' pillar in Auto Ltd's ideology, did to some extent run counter to the practice known to employees, where managers were to be task-oriented and rational rather than focused on interpersonal relations. As we have seen, the latter dichotomy was deeply ingrained in the perspective of the central management and brought forward through the Myers-Briggs inventory. This presented aspiring managers with a paradox that could not easily be resolved: they were explicitly encouraged to present and develop their 'softer' side, but at the same time discouraged from doing so, both in practice and through other statements from the leaders of the corporation.

Most participants stated that the feedback sessions were a valuable experience. However, much as they encouraged reflection, the tests also tended to reduce complex and fluid social differences to a set of stable traits. This at times fed stereotyping and social tensions. During an internal management course, the course leader commended two French speakers for their communicative abilities and high scores on 'F'. This was soon picked up in informal interaction, where other participants jokingly expressed their 'envy' of these qualities. Initially, this all happened in a good-natured manner. However, over drinks after hours more aggressive comments on the 'F', French courtesy and attractiveness to women appeared. Thus, the kind of difference that was produced through the psychological classification also made for expression of less constructive categorizations.

Similar observations were made during a culture-sensitization seminar, when participants from different countries were presented with their 'cultural classifications' based on Richard Lewis's self-assessment tests. Most Norwegian participants came out as 'blue' or linear-active persons, characterized as cold, factual, decisive planners, whereas the Swedish scores leaned slightly more to the 'yellow' side – that is, the Swedes were classified as more reactive, or more amiable, accommodating and compromise-seeking than their Nor-

wegian colleagues. This occasioned a great deal of laughing and fun making between the 'ruthless' Norwegians and the 'softer' Swedes: so much so that the participants were told to stop it later in the day, since some found it offensive. Against the backdrop of a long-established and historically grounded play on cultural biases between Norwegians and Swedes, plus the fact that the Swedish organization was brought into Auto Ltd through an aggressive acquisition just a few years prior to the studied event, the cultural classifications seemed to objectify pre-constructed differences in a way that made the joking hit a little too close to home.

The use of Myers-Briggs and other psychological inventories also seemed to have adverse effects on communication. The common language introduced tended to privilege a certain perspective, where positions and priorities were explained more in terms of innate dispositions and less in terms of socio-cultural conditions. For example, a conflict in a group discussion on financial calculations was seen in retrospect as a 'clash' between a very strong, extrovert person and others who were more introverted. Even if the task was clear and the solution reached was less than optimal, the conflict was not addressed in terms of the specific arguments or interpersonal dynamics that came about in the group, but was rather seen as a case where the introverted members should have made their point more clearly.

In a similar vein, there were cases where arguments from local managers in different countries were seen as expressive of diverging cultural values and therefore dismissed, before their logical and empirical validity could be assessed. During the set-up of a factory in Poland, the local management insisted that foremen would be needed in an early phase to meet local expectations and provide necessary supervision to new and inexperienced production workers. These arguments were initially rejected and regarded as expressions of a 'bureaucratic' Polish culture. However, sub-

sequent developments showed that the introduction of autonomous teams was premature and in the end the central management let the local leaders have their way. Soon thereafter, the productivity and quality within the Polish unit improved greatly.

Personal and cultural traits were also taken to explain organizational problems. In a case of production transfer from Sweden to the Polish factory, inadequate follow-up from the Swedish unit was seen as expressive of indecisiveness and consensus-seeking on the side of the Swedes. Allegedly because of the latter traits, nobody was ready to take responsibility and action on his own. The frustration of the Polish manager, on the other hand, was seen in terms of his Myers-Briggs profile, which was very extrovert, analytic and concerned with detail, but less strong on empathy and diplomatic skills, or lacking in the famous 'F'. Closer analysis did, however, indicate that the problem was more structural. Amongst other things, it had to do with the fact that the two units were competing for contracts and resources, and that no one specifically had been appointed as a coordinator on the Swedish side.

Thus, the instruments introduced with Myers-Briggs and other tests in Auto Ltd might have opened a new discursive field to the employees, but they did also impose certain limits when it came to communication and identity construction. Complex behaviour patterns and self-presentations were reduced to abstract traits employed by different social interests. Likewise, broad socio-cultural processes were at times understood and evaluated mainly as encounters between different cultural and personality types, with the effect that other important influences were kept out of sight.

Commensurability, Control and Change

As we have seen, the tests in Auto Ltd offered a shared framework that made people commensurable – all were classified in terms of

the same typologies and made comparable along the same scales. Indeed, one manager presented this as an explicit aim: 'I think we will continue using MBTI ... it has become a conceptual apparatus many of our employees are familiar with ... and we want to *measure*, within different groups and departments, what types the different people are' (emphasis mine). All the tests we have discussed purport to do this in a de-contextualised way, and the latter, according to Marilyn Strathern (1999), is the very essence of audit.

This seemed to have a homogenizing effect: a great number of employees made the language of Myers-Briggs their own. In so doing, they also came to conceptualize complex and fluid social influences in terms of more stable traits and distinctions. Zubiri's concept of entification (Zubiri 1984) highlights how processual phenomena may 'solidify' this way, involving some degree of objectification and reification, without necessarily moving from abstract to concrete or leaving the subjective realm entirely. In Tord Larsen's (2010) view, processes of entification are evident in many areas of social life, not the least when it comes to generation of new identities and disorders. In his words, processes of entification are processes whereby 'something inchoate congeals into a thing (Latin: *ens*), a unit, a category with discernible boundaries' (2010: 231). Such a tendency was quite apparent and important in the studied case. The employees became more similar in outlook, representing and evaluating selves and others with a focus on the same criteria. On the other hand, the same framework was a means for the construction of cultural differences and individual uniqueness. To some extent, it also seemed to inform individual 'techniques of self' – the intentional and voluntary actions whereby employees and managers sought to transform themselves, so that their lives came to carry certain aesthetic values and meet certain stylistic criteria (Foucault 1978: 74). A young trainee gave the following statement:

There is a strong focus on individual development, and this is part of the reason why Auto Ltd appealed to me ... personally, I find the management courses very useful in that respect ... From an early stage you get more conscious about your personality type. But of course, you are also influenced or molded [*sic*] by those who run the courses – they offer some kind of an answer book ...

There were, in other words, indications that a shift was taking place, from local, embedded structures of self-reflection to 'global', dis-embedded (Giddens 1991) ones. In this process homogenization and differentiation were intrinsically connected: via the practice surrounding the psychological tests, employees at Auto Ltd worked on themselves and their relations, developing new social distinctions and experiences of individuality. Yet, they tended to do so via the same conceptual frameworks, and, as we have seen, these frameworks seemed to influence their room for thought and action. There was an increasing acceptance of uniform criteria, or what Wilk (1995) calls 'structures of common difference'.

People and cultures became different in new ways, but not just in any way since, in Wilk's words, structures of common difference 'celebrate particular kinds of diversity while submerging, deflating or suppressing others' (1995: 118). There is an epistemological obscurity about audit, it is claimed, which can also be attributed to the tests used in Auto Ltd: as we have seen, they were presented as objective and 'scientific', but had their basis in positioned interpretations of social life. Likewise, the tests might appear as neutral verification at first sight, but their use clearly had an evaluative element: employees were made 'visible' along selected and specific lines, and more or less explicitly ranked against ideals in the company culture.

This way, the application of psychological personality tests might be associated with a form of indirect control. McKinlay and Taylor (1998) and others have shown how the emphasis in corporate control is shifting from

discipline to desire: how docile bodies are increasingly shaped through normative and psychological measures, rather than overt disciplining structures. In their perspective, employees and managers increasingly create themselves and realise their desires *through* discipline. This is precisely what we saw in Auto Ltd. Through the apparatus associated with the psychological tests, individuals were made to discipline themselves, by striving to develop the qualities upheld as most productive by the corporate management, and by encouraging a similar orientation in their workmates. This, in turn, might be related to the increasing emphasis on audit in Western societies, where a growing number of individuals and organizations find themselves subject to new and more intensive accounting requirements (Power 1997).

As with other forms of audit (Shore and Wright 2000), the use of psychological tests in Auto Ltd might be seen as a 'dividing practice' (Foucault 1991). By making it possible to measure differences, determine levels, and fix specialities, the use of the tests produced individuality. At the same time it was a totalizing practice, in the sense that differences were made useful by being fitted one to another. Processes of identity and self-production did, in other words, become available as an arena for instrumental action.

What the practice evolving around the tests did, in some of the cases I have touched upon, is recast 'political' or socio-cultural problems in a psychological idiom. In a form of therapeutic control (Tucker 1999), attention was directed away from organizational challenges and onto individual therapies, so that criticism was deflected. Indeed, this aspect was acknowledged by some of the managers, who saw a danger in that the practice surrounding the tests might make for too much similarity. In the words of one person: 'the drawback is that we may become too much alike ... "green" leaders all the way ... suits me fine, 'cause I am "green" myself, but I wonder how I'd see it if I were

different, or posted in a country where people tend to be different ... This thing, diversity, is important in a global company.¹⁶

Tests as Actors in Translation?

The above is not to say the tests simply functioned as clever, complex means of control. At this point it is important to separate between programme and technology (Power 1997). The programme or 'mission' of the management in the studied case was to manage human resources as well as possible. Thus, there was an implicit control theme. Yet, to some extent the technology, in other words the operational aspects, or actual practice developing around the tests, was taking its own course in the hands of different actors: as we have seen, there were traces of 'decoupling' (ibid.), where employees distanced themselves and signalled that 'psychologization' was ineffective and useless on their part. There were also traces of 'colonization' (ibid.), in that the conceptual apparatus associated with the tests seemed to affect communication in ways the management of Auto Ltd did not foresee. They aided communication in some respects, but also limited it, by diverting attention away from social complexities and onto psychological abstractions.

As I have already argued, the tests, as with other forms of audit, seemed to function as agents of change in the name of ideals such as total quality management, where audit is the key element. This suggests there is a close relationship between these measures and the so-called 'audit explosion' (ibid.). Like other forms of audit, the studied tests work because organizations literally have been made auditable. This is in line with Apel's (cited in Frisby 1976, without complete reference) argument that social technologies, in management and elsewhere, work best not when individuals articulate goals and norms on the basis of informed discussion and critique, but when they

function almost as 'stupid' natural objects which can be manipulated for instrumental purposes in science and technology. Predictability and docility are not only prerequisites for social technologies; they also result from them (cf. Foucault 1980), so that in a socio-technologically advanced society, individuals develop responsiveness to social control.

The tests at Auto Ltd seemed to work this way primarily because they involved objectification or 'imaginative embodiment of human realities in terms of a theoretical discourse' (Handler 1984: 56). Fluid individual and cultural differences were removed from their particular contexts and frozen or locked onto the abstract standard scales in the psychological inventories applied. In ontological terms, this process may well be seen as one of entification (Zubiri 1984, cited in Fowler 1998), in the sense that socio-cultural conditions which were basically in being or in the making rather than appearing in a steady form, increasingly came to be seen as entities with their own existence. It also involved some form of reification, in that lived actions and communication events were transformed into quantifiable variables. Further, they were ordered in the course of the social confrontations that characterize Auto Ltd as a rapidly expanding multinational corporation. Here, new meanings were created, while some remained and some changed – as we saw in the case of the above-mentioned 'F'.

Errington and Gewertz (2001) coined the term 'generification' to throw light on the form of objectification that takes place in engagements with structures of common difference. In their words, the process that ensues is one where particularities become either translated into the general or into a general example of the particular. This also seemed to be characteristic of the translations that surrounded the psychological tests in Auto Ltd. Individual uniqueness, as we have seen, tended to be presented in the terms from the relevant inventories, either as an example of a particular type

or combination of traits, or as a non-typical combination, defined along the same general lines.

A key point for Errington and Gewertz (ibid.) is that this process is political and associated with new lines and forms of mobilization. As we have seen, these observations too are relevant in our case. With the tests at Auto Ltd, identities increasingly seemed to be subject to instrumental manipulation. It is important to note, however, that this did not necessarily imply homogenization or differentiation, as in Errington and Gewertz's case from Melanesian ethno-politics. It seemed, rather, that instrumentalization generated new translations, such as when the call for 'F' not only added value to the 'feeling' dimension, but lent word to new distinctions between French and other employees.

These downstream translations were also influenced by structures of common difference as a hegemonic order, but did not necessarily take their direction from them. Subjects were objectified and subject to manipulation. However, employees at Auto Ltd also worked actively in these processes, to sell their competence and develop a good name within the corporation. Due to these creative acts, it seemed, individual and cultural differences were only partly subdued under management instrumentalism and partly emerging in new forms.

At the same time, they were increasingly enrolled in capitalist relations. As we have seen, they came to function as elements of human capital in an internal market, where the supply of types and traits presented by the employees met up against the demand they co-produced together with the management, their tests and other influences. One may, in other words, suggest that the practice surrounding the tests at Auto Ltd was also associated with a form of commodification (Marx and Engels 1998), where relationships relatively untainted by the market are gradually drawn into commercial relationships of buying and selling.

Final Remarks

In all, the use of the tests seemed to bring forth a process of entification (Zubiri 1984, cited in Fowler 1998), where fluid and processual socio-cultural conditions increasingly came to be seen as entities with their own existence. As indicated above, this process was multifaceted, with objectification, reification, instrumentalization and commodification as important aspects. For this reason, it seemed to exert a considerable influence in the social life of the corporation. Still, it did not necessarily imply that individual and cultural differences one-sidedly were brought under the control of privileged actors. It also formed a ground for further socio-cultural translations, where individuals and cultural collectives struggled to assert themselves and realize their values.

This, I have tried to show, was related to the observation that the tests themselves were important actors, tending to work beyond the stated programme of the management. In Auto Ltd, the prevalence of comments such as 'where is your "F"?' suggested how Myers-Briggs and other tests offered a new idiom people both found useful and resisted. Nevertheless, it was also indicative of how the practice surrounding the tests tended to lead communication away from the particularities of social encounters and into a more abstract, psychological language game. As we have seen, this might be fruitful in many ways. However, it might also pose a limitation in a multinational corporation, where diversity and close attention to socio-cultural negotiations are considered critical to organizational development and competitive strength. Against this background, the studied case gives reason to question and continue exploring the effects of psychological type or trait assessments in an increasingly global working life.

Sigrid Damman is a social anthropologist and Research Scientist at SINTEF Technology and

Society. She is also affiliated to the Department of Social Anthropology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, as a Research Fellow. Most of her research has been on management and organization in international contexts, focused on institutional frameworks and the opportunities and limitations they pose when it comes to practice, learning and cooperation. Currently, her main projects are on sustainable enterprise development, industrial networks and institutional frameworks surrounding local content in the oil and gas sector. E-mail: Sigrid.Damman@sintef.no

Notes

1. By Japanistic production ideologies I mean a range of production systems and theories that claim an association with Japan's industrial success and form part of a tradition that has followed in the wake of Ohno's (1988) 'lean production'.
2. It is mainly based on Carl Jung's notion of psychological types, which stems from his personal observations of life and lacks foundation in statistical or experimental studies.
3. See <http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/tt/t-articl/mb-simpl.htm>.
4. See <http://www.insightsworld.com> for the developers' own presentation of the system.
5. A more detailed presentation of the test and related tools can be found at <http://www.cultureactive.com/info/index.lasso?-Token.i=&-Token.s=>
6. A 'green' person in the Insights scheme is someone who is in control of his emotions, reads instructions, takes carefully considered decisions, and makes use of critical thinking to create practical solutions.

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