Organised Labour and Psychology's Role: Some South African Perspectives

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There is a growing current debate concerning the relevance of psychology and its failure to locate itself within the South African context (see Dawes, 1986; Foster, 1986; Fullagar, 1984; Nzimande, 1984). Dawes (1986) has suggested that a nuance of "relevance" in this instance is the extent to which psychology addresses the problems and socio-political conditions of the majority, or the working class, in an africanist context. Taking this as a major criterion of relevance, one can say that organisational/industrial psychology in South Africa has, to a large extent, become irrelevant.

Since its inception as a separate area of applied psychology, industrial psychology has tended to ignore the needs of the blue-collar worker and the phenomenon of working class or labour organisations. Traditionally, organisational psychologists have allowed a managerial elite (the State, human resource managers, and administrators) to define their focus of enquiry. In addition, the theory of industrial psychology is firmly embedded in a Euro-American bourgeois ideology where the owners of capital have sponsored a psychology which caters for

their own interests (1) but prevents the realisation of the interests, and consolidation, of labour organisations. For example, job enrichment techniques are perceived by unionists as increasing job dilution, and interfering with job classification and standards systems (Ranick, 1973; Shepard, 1974). Also the emphasis in psychometric testing on individual differentiation amongst workers goes against the labour principles of solidarity and seniority (Barkin, 1961; Rhoads & Landy, 1973). Furthermore, many industrial psychological techniques and assessments have been used as the bases of a rationale for retrenchment or in order to avoid union organising altogether. For example the techniques of work measurement and incentive bonuses are perceived by South African unionists as resulting in mechanisation and lowered employment levels (Maller, 1986).

There are other reasons for industrial psychology's irrelevance and the "mutual indifference" (Shostack, 1964) between psychology and labour. Industrial psychology has always regarded itself as a professional discipline which has been concerned with developing career potentialities and serving only those organisations capable of sponsoring research. Consequently, since its inception, the scope of industrial/organisational research has been limited to primarily non-union issues due to the discipline's dependence on capital to define its concerns and provide it with research opportunities. The schism

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(1) The application of behavioural science theory and methodology to industry in South Africa (as elsewhere) has been as a proposed solution to low production per man hour, high absenteeism and labour turnover, and general industrial unrest.

between psychologists and labour is further exacerbated by the predominantly middle class, white backgrounds of its votaries. As such it is difficult for psychologists to empathise with and conceptualise, let alone measure, the work experiences and problems of black workers. The solution to this dilemma has tended to be the development of separate approaches, often with racist undertones, to the understanding of the work behaviour of black and white employees (see Webster's article in the current edition).

Finally, the socio-political locus of much industrial psychology is American capitalism. The legacies of scientific management and human relations are founded in an American work ethic which has always emphasised individualism, achievement, productivity, and profit incentive systems. The cross cultural generality of American organisational theories has frequently been questioned. For example, the motivational approaches of McClelland, Maslow, Herzberg, and Vroom all emphasise the need for achievement. Hofstede (1980) has shown that the desire to achieve does not occupy an equally central position in a variety of cultures. He questions the universal validity of organisational theories developed in one country, such as the United States. Obvious across-country differences in work values, government policies and legislation, labour market situations and labour union power positions prevent a universal theory. Consequently the generalising of American theories to a workerist or africanist context is not only highly questionable but also "smacks" of cultural imperialism (see Dawes (1986)).

These are just some of the reasons (2) why organisational

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(2) For further suggestions see Fullagar (1984) and Nzimande (1984).

psychologists are largely ignorant of workers' perceptions, problems and organisations, while workers and unions remain skeptical and suspicious about organisational and psychological research. Even where the theory and context are homogenous (i.e., in America) unionists perceive "the contribution of psychologists, at best to be unrelated to their needs, at worst to be antithetical to their interests" (Huszczo, Wiggins, & Currie, 1984, p.432).

However, since the late 1970's, several organisational psychologists have begun to focus on organised labour. This growing interest among American and European psychologists can be evidenced in the formation of various committees within the American Psychological Association, a special edition of the International Review of Applied Psychology (1981), a special section of the American Psychologist (1984), and a growing body of empirical research, all specifically addressing the issue of psychology's relationship with, and contribution to, labour.

Unfortunately, a similar upsurge in union research has not been forthcoming in South Africa. Psychological articles on labour organisations and labour management relations are a scarcity in South African psychological and labour journals. Psychologists and their services are seldom employed by unions. Few courses are offered at tertiary institutions which attempt to outline a psychological theory of labour with the results that (a) most attempts to apply psychology to labour have been carried out by lay practitioners with common sense concerns and little theoretical or research rigour, and (b) students of industrial/organisational psychology know little about the needs and functions of labour organisations.

Nevertheless, the rapid growth and mobilisation of working class organisations and the corresponding impact on industrial relations in

South Africa has generated a small amount of research by several organisations and individuals. Webster (1985) has identified three broad categories of such research. Firstly, research which is initiated, defined and conducted for the State and undertaken mainly by the National Manpower Commission and the Human Sciences Research Council. Secondly, research undertaken within companies and initiated by management to understand and control the managment-labour interface. The third category consists of industrial relations research conducted by universities or associated institutions (such as the Institute of Industrial Relations and the Institute for Labour Studies). However, regardless of category, most of this research is not concerned with developing a psychology of labour but rather with understanding the history, economics and legality of employment practices, grievance procedures, collective bargaining and so forth. As such it is largely atheoretical.

Recently, however, there have been several "open-systems" aproaches developed by psychologists in an attempt to develop a psychology which is more relevant to labour organisations and blue-collar workers. This research distinguishes itself from the third category above in that its major theoretical and methodological resource is psychological. For example, Bluen (1986), locating his research in current models of stress, has investigated the psychological consequences of various industrial relations stressors. Several forms of role stress have been associated with being a shop steward or union official. Shop stewards report high levels of (a) role ambiguity because they have received no clear-cut guidelines or training, and (b) role conflict because they are continually required to interact with members of both management and workers, both of whom place conflicting demands on them. In addition,

union members are subjected to various sources of stress such as management victimisation, being discharged for being a member of a union, threatened with dismissal and plant closure, denial of privileges and transfer to lower paying jobs (Bluen, 1986). Strikes themselves are obviously stressful and include such stressful incidents as being physically chased and locked out of company premises and hostels, being threatened with permanent unemployment in an industry, being assaulted, evicted or arrested, being forced at gunpoint to return to work by security police, and being deported back to rural areas. Bluen has attempted to account for these factors in developing a model of industrial relations stress.

Psychological research has also been conducted in South Africa on commitment to labour organisations with the aim of improving union welfare (Fullagar, 1986). Commitment has been identified as an important variable both in terms of developing a psychology of unions and because it is a crucial variable with respect to union effectiveness (Gordon & Burt, 1981; Gordon & Nurick, 1981). Child, Loveridge and Warner (1973) have noted that

> "the general lack of appreciation of member orientations, of the processes leading to their emergence and the way they are acted out through behaviour in the union, have been serious omissions, not just of trade union studies, but much of organisational theory in general."(p.75)

Consequently, the definition of union commitment and its behavioural manifestations impinge on union democracy and deserve researching.

Other examples of psychological research on labour organisations are Donald's (1985) research on industrial relations climate which

identified key in-company industrial relations dimensions such as employee representation, grievance and disciplinary procedures, communications and supervisor influences; Rigby's (1984) investigation into some of the elements influencing the union-management relationship; and Van Zwam's (1986) study of the work consequences of trade union membership on job attitudes.

Despite the fact that the above research goes a long way toward rectifying the neglect of industrial/organisational psychologists of labour, it is characterised by a number of methodological and philosophical problems. For example, methodologically these studies tend to rely on self-report questionnaire measures which may produce artefactual results because of "priming" and "consistency" effects. Basically, these arguments rely on a postulated need for individuals to present consistent information about themselves, possibly distorting "true" information because of their memory of their earlier responses. This poses a serious threat to the validity of both the measures used, and the subsequent tests of empirical relationships. Ideally, to eliminate shared method invariance as a potential alternative explanation, different measurement devices should be used to study each variable. The difficulty of access to unions as well as the lack of union information with respect to the concepts studied make it difficult if not impossible to obtain independent, "objective" measures.

Another problem associated with these studies is that the samples necessitate caution in terms of the generalisability of the results to other unions and blue-collar workers. As Tannenbaum and Kahn (1958) have noted,

> "One of the major processes of social science is
> extrapolation from the specific to the general,
> from a sample population in hand to a universe
> beyond reach, from variables and measures of
> limited scope to ideas concerning broader, social
> processes. To stop short of such generalisations
> is to be less than scientific, but to attempt them
> from insufficient data is also less than
> scientific, and perhaps more dangerous."
> (pp.235-236).

The generalisation of results becomes more problematic if one takes into

account that in South Africa there are many different independent unions

and several affiliative bodies with essentially differing viewpoints,

fundamental objectives and methods of obtaining them. Consequently what

applies to one union may not be applicable to another. No judgements may

be rendered nor generalisations made in regard to unionism as such from

the study of any union or any small number of unions, or any group.

Webster (1985), although not specifically addressing the above

psychological research, has identified a central philosophical or

theoretical problem, which characterises this type of investigation and

which we briefly mentioned above. That is the theory utilised and the

variables measured are determined by industrial relations (and

psychological) theory and practice which has been developed in a First

World context.

> "Stable industrial relations....were developed in
> industrialized countries in Europe and North
> America in an intimate relationship with certain
> sets of values, institutions and economic and
> social structures. In other words, the
> incorporation of the working class required a set
> of material preconditions. Hyman identifies six as
> existing in Western Europe and North America:
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> (a) the presence of a margin for concession to
> workers' demands without jeopardising the
> continued accumulation of capital,
> (b) a detachment of the state from the routine
> conduct of economic life,

(c) a tradition of moderate reformism within the
trade union movement itself,
(d) the weakness or crushing of a revolutionary
tradition,
(e) the early (and relatively peaceful) attainment
of formal social and political rights by
significant sectors of the working population,
(f) the emergence and consolidation of union
organization independently of the existence of any
socialist or distinctively working-class political
movement. (Webster, 1985, pp. 7-8).

Webster points out that although some of these conditions are beginning

to emerge in South Africa, most are not present. The extreme difference

in the socio-political circumstances surrounding labour organisations in

South Africa has probably facilitated the weak relationships which exist

between the variables in the psychological research described above. For

example, Van Zwam found that traditional, American measures of union

attitudes, life satisfaction, organisational and demographic

characteristics, had a weak effect on the job attitudes of both

unionised and non-unionised workers. This contradicts the research

findings of overseas research and may well be attributable to the

different types of union in South Africa as opposed to America (Southall

(1984) distinguishes between the political unions of South Africa and

American business unionism); the totally different life and material

circumstances of the South African black worker; and the disparities in

organisational structure (South African organisations have been noted

for their extreme form of racial bureaucracy (Wiendieck, 1979)).

Consequently, instruments developed in the United States to measure

these factors may have very little applied relevance in a South African

context. This is well illustrated when one tries to generalise American

theories of union commitment to black workers in South Africa. Research

in the United States indicates that workers become attached to unions

for extrinsic, calculative and economic reasons. This concords with

social theorists' perceptions of American unions as following a business
unionism philosophy (Kochan, 1980); they are primarily concerned with
satisfying the short-term economic and job-related needs of their
members, rather than concentrating on long-term socio-political issues.
This may be because of a work ethic which is "job" rather than "class"
orientated. Attachment to unions in South Africa, in most instances, is
dependent to a far greater extent on the perceptions of workers that
unions are instrumental to achieving more intrinsic outcomes, such as
the improvement of worker rights and dignity, greater control over the
work process, participation in decision-making, political redress, as
well as fincancial and job security. Furthermore, feelings of alienation
and exploitation, together with a strong development of class
consciousness have been found to be important determinants of union
loyalty in South Africa (Fullagar, 1986). As Webster (1985) has noted,

> "It is precisely because of the different material
> and political conditions of labour in South Africa
> that we have seen emerge over the past decade a
> powerful and militant labour movement. In its wake
> it has also generated a quite distinct type of
> labour studies." (p.8)

But perhaps an equally serious problem with the psychological
research that has been conducted on organised labour is the overemphasis
on the experimental and survey traditions. These traditions are
concerned with discovering a priori causal laws or data-based
relationships. Experimenters working in these traditions control subject
activities and define appropriate responses. Problems are defined either
through a process of deduction from theory, or a process of induction
from data. There are serious disadvantages associated with this type of
approach, especially in ill-defined, under-researched areas. An

alternative, more appropriate approach is needed, especially at this stage of the relationship between psychology and labour and with the low levels of trust that exist between organised labour and psychologists. It is necessary to move away from doing research on labour to doing research with labour. A more participatory form of research is needed which places greater emphasis on a democratic process of investigation.

To this end, the authors conducted an exploratory investigation to ascertain various unions' needs for psychological services and their attitudes toward psychologists as a precursor to defining a more "relevant" role for organisational psychologists. To reiterate, although the psychological research outlined above is an attempt to bridge the gap between psychology and labour, the problems have been defined and researched by academics using theoretical models and research which may be totally inappropriate. Even though the study did not directly address many of the problems associated with survey information which have been outlined above, we felt it was important to attempt to describe the needs that unionists believe to be the most pressing and important.

The union sample consisted of 44 trade union officials representing a variety of unions from a number of federations (See Table 1). It must

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the sample.

FEDERATION	No. OF UNIONS	No. INTERVIEWED	FEDERATION MEMBERSHIP	
			PAID UP	SIGNED UP
COSATU	33	11	430 000	565 000
TUCSA	55	15	40 000	–
CUSA	11	6	–	180 000
SACOL	13	6	100 000	–
AZACTU	9	6	–	70 000

be noted that because the sample consisted of office bearers, the

perceptions reported here may not be the same as those of shopfloor workers. The survey consisted of a semi-structured interview based on analogous research conducted in the USA by Huszczo, Wiggins, and Currie (1984). This research utilised a questionnaire which included a survey of organised labour's perceived need for various psychological services. In consultation with a number of trade unionists and social scientists involved in organised labour, several items were either altered or omitted to make the questionnaire relevant in the South African context.

The interview with union representatives started with a brief description of the educational requirements of industrial psychologists in South Africa. This was to provide unionists with a clearer picture of the services which psychologists are capable of offering. The second stage comprised of a number of open-ended questions which attempted to ascertain whether the union had ever sought the aid of a psychologist or other professional and in what capacity; what benefits were important for the union; whether the union would seek the help of a professional person to achieve its aims or whether this type of help would be detrimental to the labour organisation. Finally, the third stage of the interview consisted of the administration of the adaptation of Huszczo et al.'s (1984) scale which assessed the extent of the perceived need for psychological services by trade unions. This scale consisted of a list of twenty psychological services to which respondents had to indicate the extent of the union's need (4="Very Strong Need", 3="Strong Need", 2="Some Need", 1="No Need").

The frequency scores for unionists' perceived needs for psychological services are presented in Table 2. The questionnaire's four-point scale has been collapsed into two categories ("perceived need" or "no need") for convenience sake. The results indicate that the need for

psychological services was not a pervasive one, but one which expressed itself most strongly in certain specific areas. The highest expressed need was for the provision of skills which would enhance the effectiveness and the democratic function of the union. For example, there was a strong need for psychologists to play a strategic role and provide advice during negotiations with management (73%). This advice should include information concerning work study methods, the psychological and organisational consequences of automation and production line work, work stress and job overload, human factors involved in accidents and safety, and so on (this is the kind of service that is at present being offered by organisations such as the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA) and the Technical Advice Group (TAG)). Furthermore, there was a positive need for the provision of training in bargaining techniques (58%). Psychologists have generated a considerable amount of research and theory which has focused directly on the psychological components which operate at the bargaining table. This could be adapted for, and located in, the South African context. In addition there was a high need (70%) for the development of leadership training programmes among union officials and the provision of classes/workshops for union members (59%). In terms of increasing union democracy, psychological services were perceived as being useful in conducting attitude surveys amongst union members (73%) and developing strategies to increase participation in union activities (64%). Also the majority of respondents expressed a need for psychologists to provide personal counselling for both union members (55%) and families of union members (56%).

There were a number of areas where there was little need for psychological services. For example, only 27% of the respondents saw the

Table 2: Percentage need for psychological services.

STATEMENT	PERCENTAGE NEED	
	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE
1. Develop leadership training programmes among union leaders.	30%	70%
2. Conduct attitude surveys of the union members.	27%	73%
3. Provide advice during negotiations with management.	27%	73%
4. Develop strategies to increase participation in union activities.	36%	64%
5. Provide training in bargaining techniques.	42%	58%
6. Improve communications between union leadership and members.	55%	45%
7. Improve communications between union and management.	52%	48%
8. Reduce work related stress.	51%	49%
9. Establish alcoholism and other drug abuse assistance programmes.	55%	45%
10. Provide personal counselling.	45%	55%
11. Provide career planning counselling.	51%	49%
12. Provide counselling to families of members.	44%	56%
13. Evaluate disability cases.	52%	48%
14. Provide classes/workshops for union members.	41%	59%
15. Consult with union staff on techniques for improving the work environment.	45%	55%
16. Develop programmes aimed at increasing work commitment.	73%	27%
17. Train union leaders on management skills needed to work with their own office staff.	55%	45%
18. Conduct research on factors related to enhancing the union's public image.	47%	53%
19. Consult with unions on enhancing the union's public image.	67%	33%
20. Provide conflict resolution training.	57%	43%

need for the development of programmes aimed at increasing work commitment. Here one sees a strong contradiction of American psychological labour theory which has tended to emphasise the concept of dual allegiance. That is that individuals loyal to their union will also be loyal to their work, consequently the goals of the organisation and the labour organisation are perceived as similar. The present results indicate that increasing commitment to work was not seen as a priority by unions. Eighty percent of the respondents declared this to be a managerial task. As one union official pointed out,

> "We are not business unions involved in a "sweetheart" relationship with the owners of production. If management want increased job commitment, they must fight for it."(3)

Moreover, a large proportion of respondents (57%) felt that psychologists should not provide conflict resolution training. Again, this may be a reflection of the view that conflict is not easily resolvable, but inherent in the structure of industrial relations. The collective bargaining relationship is essentially an adversarial one and consists of a process which is antithetical to the traditional psychological concern of harmonious human relations. Also, most unions were not interested in psychological aid in enhancing the union's public image.

There were a number of areas where there was a relatively ambiguous response concerning the need for psychological services. These included the improvement of communication both between union leadership and rank-and-file members, and union and management, the reduction of

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(3) The anonymity of respondents' remarks has been respected.

work-related stress and the establishment of alcoholism and other drug abuse assistance programmes, and the provision of career planning and counselling. These services were not of high priority to many unions who are still concerned with negotiating basic substantive needs and recognition agreements.

Overall the results appear to confirm organised labour's scepticism and suspicion regarding the possible role of psychologists in trade unions. However, it must be pointed out that after completing the questionnaire and learning of the services that psychologists could provide, 67% of the respondents felt that they would seek psychological aid in the future. The results may therefore be an artefact of unionists not knowing the kinds of services which psychologists can offer. Nevertheless, compared to the need for other types of services, psychological aid was low on unionist's list of priorities (see Table 3). These results indicate that there is a strong need for professional involvement in unions. However, there is not necessarily a need for psychological services, or, if that need does occur, it is often a low priority. Lack of finances prevent the hiring of psychological services.

Table 3: Professional services needed by unionists.

Legal Aid	87%
Aid from economists and accountants	80%
Education in shop-floor and political issues	36%
Aid from computer specialists	24%
Training and advice during negotiations	21%
Health and safety	19%

At this stage of labour development, legal and economic advice, recruitment drives and salaries for full-time union staff are the most important financial demands. Many unions are still involved in issues such as recruitment, shop-floor participation, recognition by companies, and prevention of harassment by the State. Most South African labour organisations are involved in distributive bargaining for better wages, job security, physical work conditions and fair compensation. Consequently, psychological services, however beneficial, are less important than the basic prerequisites of union existence. Furthermore, unions appear more prone to seek the aid of professionals from fields other than psychology in order to perform services such as research, counselling, training and consulting. In terms of the use of professionals other than social scientists, unions consulted labour lawyers, engineers, industrial engineers, computer specialists, explosives experts, health and safety specialists, pension consultants, and accountants. Generally, there was a strong expressed need for expert advice, although the form this advice should take varied across unions. One opinion, held by a large number of unionists from TUCSA, CUSA, and COSATU was that professional aid was important in technical areas, but that unions should rely primarily on their workers. Most unionists acknowledged the need for advice in specialist or technical issues (e.g., law, health, safety, etc.). This need stemmed from the necessity to compete with sophisticated management advisors who were seen as "running rings" around the less developed unionists.

Two issues, however, did emerge from the interviews. One was that consultants, outside experts and researchers, should not adopt positions as neutral or "objective" observers. Any aid should be partisan in that it should incorporate, accept, and promote the goals of the labour

organisation. Research was seen as being inherently political in that it was a means for shifting the balance of power away from management towards labour. As one union official stated,

> "Routing is important, everything a psychologist does should be routed through the unions. He must work with us, not for us."

Thus, professional assistance was considered valuable if it was participative in nature and undertaken as a cooperative endeavour.

The other issue was the perceived social and ideological disparity between outside experts and labour organisations. In certain cases the contributions of outside experts were seen as a dilution of worker ideals;

> "..involvement by experts would be detrimental to our union. The only way to achieve our aims is through the backing of our members."

In other instances, the differences in background and experience were perceived as preventing outside experts from a true appreciation of worker problems;

> "Experts in all fields are useful and can be of great benefit. Social scientists are experts in their fields and we are specialists in ours. You could not possibly be able to help us. We grew up in the ranks of workers. We know our workers' problems and are capable of presenting our own cases."

However, it must be emphasised that these issues were raised by a minority of the respondents. Most union officials believed that there was a role for professionals and social scientists in the development of union welfare.

In conclusion, it can be said that there is scope for psychological

involvement in labour organisations. This must be done in areas in which labour itself has defined a need for research and not necessarily in areas deemed relevant by overseas academic practice. The above survey has attempted to identify some of these areas.

We started this paper by saying that there is a growing interest to establish a more relevant and systematic social science in South Africa. This interest is by no means limited to psychologists. Several social scientists, working individually or in groups (e.g., LMG, HIC, OASSSA, TAG, SALB, etc.,) have already begun to address many of the problems outlined above in what has been termed a "new labour studies" (Southall, 1984; Webster, 1985). Southall (1984) has commented that this new labour studies is,

> "highly committed politically, and makes no pretension whatsoever to "neutrality" as if workers and employers play equal but different roles in the unending process of capitalist production. It is unashamedly partisan on behalf of workers in struggle; and further, in the case of South Africa, it views the non-racial trade union movement as a major vehicle (but not necessarily the preeminent one) for radically transforming relations between capital and labour in the work place and between oppressors and oppressed in the polity." (p.89)

Webster (1985) has delineated five characteristics associated with the new labour studies; (1) labour is seen as part of a socio-political movement and not as an input within an industrial relations system; (2) the focus of concern moves beyond the boundaries of the workplace to take into account social and political factors which influence the quality of work life; (3) the major emphasis is on workplace democracy and the development of greater control and participation by workers; (4) there is a movement away from traditional positivist methodologies

toward more qualitative and phenomenological approaches; (5) the new labour studies is inter-disciplinary in nature in that it draws upon the theories, methods, and research findings of sociology, history, anthropology, economics, law, medicine, engineering, and political science as well as psychology. These same features must characterise any attempt to make organisational psychology more relevant to the majority of workers.

Psychology must show itself willing to research union issues and aid in union aims. Consequently a participatory form of research is called for. This would place a greater emphasis on social change and a democratic method of investigation. What is needed is joint research action to solve shared problems and encourage mutual participation in decision making. Furthermore, any skewed distribution of power between researcher and researched could be minimalised if researchers adopt the role of "resource" rather than "expert". Once a participatory relationship has been established, research will emerge that will both benefit the unions and establish a relevant body of theory for psychology to use. Perhaps the most appropriate approach at the moment is an actionalist one. Action approaches attempt to understand and explore the work community nexus as well as incorporating socially generated and distributed aims, attitudes and actions in any model of worker behaviour. The little psychological research which has been done on labour unions in South Africa has realised that the behaviour of workers will never be fully understood without paying attention to factors outside the organisation - whether these are community affiliations, social origins or national culture.

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