THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL VALUES
ON ORGANISATIONAL CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

The role of self identity and personal values in organisational choice was investigated. Results obtained from the Australian National Social Science Survey 1988 (NSSS), as well as from interviewing 26 lawyers and public relations officers from two types of organisations (corporate and community) supported the hypothesis that individuals select to work in organisations that complement their personal values. Firstly, a correspondence analysis revealed that individuals who had a right wing "capitalist" perspective were more likely to be employed in private organisations, whereas individuals with a left wing "socialist" perspective tended to be employed in government institutions. Furthermore, the interviews showed that organisational choice was a subjective process whereby individuals attempted to match their personal values with that of the employing organisation. Although objective job factors were shown to influence choice, the ability to implement one's self identity and personal values underlined the individual's organisational selection behaviour.

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One of the most important decisions confronting individuals is their employment choice. Given that the majority of people spend most of their adult lives at work, it can be argued that this choice has significant consequences. Employment is not only important in providing the individual with a source of income, but also because it plays a critical "role in the formation of self-esteem, identity and a sense of order" (Work in America, 1973, p.4). Employment also provides an outlet in which individuals can use their skills and knowledge, express their interests and interact with other people.

Traditionally, much of the literature about the phenomenon of employment choice has centred on career or occupational choice (Hener & Meir, 1981; Holland, 1973; Mount & Muchinsky, 1978; Spokane, 1979; Super, 1957), and overlooked the role of organisational choice. However, as Tom (1971) has stated, an "individual's work outcome is not complete until he or she decides on a particular organisation" (p.577). Furthermore, the small amount of research that has been undertaken on organisational choice has emphasised the rational elements of the choice process, and conceptualised choice as an analysis of objective work place characteristics and benefits (eg. Behling, Labovitz & Gainer, 1968; Vroom, 1966). However, the exclusion from this research of subjective elements of the choice process is problematic, as the instrumental goals that are a component of the rational choice models may simply be a manifestation of an individual's self image; the achievement of such goals may act to reinforce an individual's own values and identity.

Additionally, there is evidence that the organisational choice decision is directly influenced by personal values. Tom (1971) reported that the similarity between an individual's self description and the organisation that he or she most preferred to work in was much greater than the similarity between an individual's personality and his or her least preferred organisation. Thus, he argued that organisational choice is influenced by both the individual's personality or values and the way the organisation is viewed. Moreover, evidence from Turban, Eyring and Campion (1993) reinforces the view that job choice is based upon subjective preferences, such as the type of work, rather than objective reasons.

This view of organisational choice as a process that involves values or personal preferences is congruent with the findings relating to person-organisation fit (Chatman, 1991; O'Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell, 1991; Posner, 1992; Schneider, 1987). The basic principle behind this research is that a "fit" or congruence between a person and an organisation occurs when an individual identifies with and assimilates the image, goals and values of the firm. Therefore, an individual will be attracted to a firm only if that person's goals are similar to those of the employing organisation (Schneider, 1987).

As organisational choice, particularly the influence of subjective elements such as personal values, appears to be a relatively neglected area of the career choice literature, the aim of the current research is to examine the influence of self identity and personal values on this choice. It is hypothesised that the way in which people perceive themselves will influence their choice of employing organisation, and that individuals will ultimately seek to work in organisations that match their values. Thus it is expected that different types of organisation will attract employees with particular values.

One element of organisations that may influence choice decisions is the profit focus; that is, whether the organisation is profit-based, not-for-profit, or within the public sector (which may have

elements of both). The first stage of the research uses survey research to compare the values of those working in each of these organisational forms.

An additional element is the purpose of the organisation's output; that is, whether its core product or service is both accessible and beneficial to the entire public (a collective focus) or designed to benefit a particular segment of society (an individual focus). Organisations can therefore be classified into four "types": community (collective and not-for-profit), utility (collective and profit), charity (individual and not-for-profit) and corporate (individual and profit). If organisational choice was based upon the expression of individual values, it would be expected that the greatest difference in values would be between those in organisations in diagonally opposite quadrants. In particular, it would be expected that the values of those employed in community organisations would differ from those employed in corporate organisations. The second stage of the research uses interview data to compare the influence of values upon organisational choice for those employed in corporate and community organisations.

STAGE 1: SURVEY

Method

Results from the Australian National Social Science Survey (NSSS) of 1988, a national survey of a sample of 6203 individuals conducted under the auspices of Australian National University (Kelley, Cushing & Heady, 1988), were analysed. A description of the variables used to measure personal values is given in Table 1. The middle categories of the attitude, success, ambition and political alignment variables were eliminated for the purposes of this analysis.

Table 1

Description of variables used to measure personal values

Social class "Lower" and "Working" (Low-Wrk); "Middle" and "Upper" (Mid-Up).

Political party identification "Liberal" and "National" (Lib/Nat); "Labour" (Labour).

Political alignment "Strongly left" and "Somewhat left" (Left); "Somewhat right" and "Strongly right" (Right).

Attitude to redistribution of wealth "Definitely agree" and "Agree" (Redistr); "Disagree" and "Definitely disagree" (NoRedis).

Attitude to control of multinationals "Definitely agree" and "Agree" (Mn-Contl); "Disagree" and "Definitely disagree" (Mn-NoCtl).

Attitude to power of big business "Far too much" and "Too much" (TooPwr); "Too little" and "Far too little" (NotPwr).

Like to be surrounded by signs of success "Strongly agree" and "Agree" (Suc-Imp); "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree" (Suc-NoImp).

Very ambitious "Strongly agree" and "Agree" (Ambit); "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree"(NoAmbit).

Attitude to government spending on the environment "Far too much" and "Too much" (Env-Spd); "Too little" and "Far too little" (Env-NoS)

Attitude to government spending on health "Far too much" and "Too much" (Hth-Spd); "Too little" and "Far too little" (Hth-NoS)

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In the original survey, employment was measured by a 7-item variable showing the nature of the respondents' employing organisation. For this study the original three categories "local", "state" and "federal government" were collapsed to represent public sector institutions, labelled "Govt" (n =1603). The category "private companies" was labelled "Profit" to indicate a profit-seeking orientation (n = 2790). The "other" category was labelled "Non-Pft" to represent not-for-profit organisations (n =56). The remaining two categories, "family business" and "self-employed" were deleted for the analysis.

Results and Discussion

A correspondence analysis (Weller & Romney, 1990) (Figure 1) demonstrated that individuals could be clustered based upon their values, and that groups of personal value characteristics were attracted towards certain types of organisations. Reviewing dimension one (the horizontal axis) of the correspondence analysis plot, there were two groups of data points that contributed to and best fitted the dimension. The first group, situated to the left, indicated that working in a profit-based organisation (Profit) was associated with a set of values that opposed the redistribution of wealth (NoRedis) and stronger control of multinational companies (Mn-NoCntl), supported right wing policies (Right), and thought that big business was not too powerful (NotPwr). These points suggest a capitalistic set of values is associated with employment in profit-focused organisations.

The second group of data points, located to the right, indicated that working in a public sector organisation was associated with values that favoured the redistribution of wealth (Redistr), left wing policies (Left), and beliefs that big business has too much power (TooPwr). This second grouping of values suggests a collective or community based identity is associated with working in the public sector. Taking these two groupings together, dimension one appears to represent the extent of the individual's political-economic ideology, which in turn is associated with organisational choice.

The data points that were of importance to the second dimension suggested that several other elements may be found together: working in a non-profit organisation (Non-Pft), middle to upper class (Mid-Up), and a belief that success is important (Suc-Imp). Similarly, viewing oneself as lower to working class (Low-Wrk) is likely to be associated with the belief that signs of success are not important (Suc-NoImp). Although the success and social class points were located close to each other, the non-profit response was very distant from the other responses, indicating that this point did not strongly relate to the other points.

FIGURE 1

Correspondence Analysis Plot Representing the Relationship Between Value Characteristics and Organisational Type
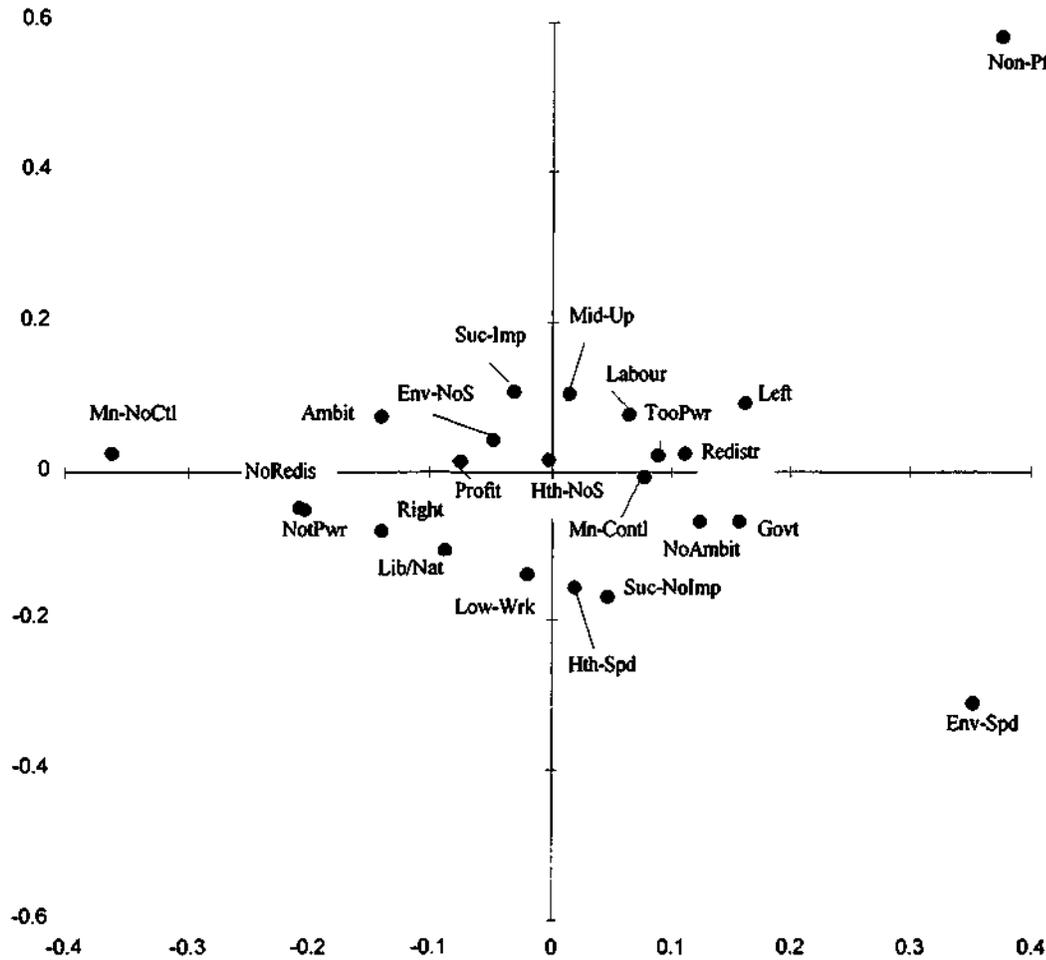
Nevertheless, comparing the similarities between the data points grouped together and contrasting them against the other group, it seems that dimension two indicates the relationship between social class and values related to success. Those who viewed themselves as being middle to upper class tended to value success, whereas individuals who classified themselves as lower to working class were less likely to emphasise this aspect.

STAGE 2: INTERVIEWS

Method

Interviews were conducted with employed workers; 13 lawyers and 13 public relations officers presently working full time in corporate and community organisations. Of the eight lawyers who worked in corporate law firms, four were male and four were female, and their ages ranged from 23 to 40 years. Of the five community legal aid lawyers, three were male and two were female, and their ages ranged from 25 to 35 years. Six corporate public relations officers from a financial

institution, three mining and two chemical companies were interviewed. Four females and two males made up the sample and their ages ranged from 21 to 55 years. Of the seven community public relations officers, four were female and three were male, and their age ranged from 22 to 55 years. The organisations from which they were selected included environmental and welfare agencies.

Individual interviews were semi structured and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Their focus was upon the role of personal values in organisational choice, and included questions upon:

- how the individual perceived and described him/herself
- the individual's work history
- the factors contributing to the choice of organisation
- the image and values of the employing organisation
- the perceived compatibility between organisation and individual
- the role that personal values played in the organisational choice decision making process
- the relationship between work and non-work roles.

Results

Individuals who were employed in corporate and community organisations expressed their identities in different ways. The corporate employees perceived themselves in terms of their professional lifestyle, and valued ambition and success. In contrast, community employees saw themselves as part of a wider community, and expressed strong values regarding social issues such as the environment, community welfare and human rights.

Furthermore, the rationale underlying the organisational choice of those working in the corporate sector was quite different to those in community organisations, and reflected underlying personal values. The choice process of the corporate sector employees was driven by the high value they placed upon the opportunity for career advancement to a higher position, the status and prestige associated with the employing organisation, and its financial or professional reputation. In contrast, employees of community organisations expressed the need to work in organisations which reflected their own strong political and/or social concerns and values. They viewed their organisational choice not as a means of achieving personal materialistic goals, but rather as a means of allowing them to contribute to the betterment of society. Their organisational choice was dictated by their belief that it was more important to undertake work that was important and worthwhile, than to receive a high salary.

To both groups, organisational choice was, to some degree, seen as a reflection of individual lifestyle. Corporate employees dichotomised their lifestyle into work and non-work roles. Although a majority of the corporate employees discussed their commitment to their work and career, they still managed to separate this part of their life from their non-work lifestyle. In contrast, the community employees saw their roles as "worker" and "citizen" as being complementary. Their interests, beliefs, lifestyle and organisational choice all moulded together, and as a result, they found it difficult to separate the work and non-work roles.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that individuals select to work in organisations which complement their personal values. This finding is consistent with Tom's (1971) theory that organisational choice is determined by subjective factors and influences.

Secondly, the results support the hypothesis that certain types of organisations attract individuals with similar identities. Individuals were found to belong in one of two main categories, with either a social or corporate orientation. Furthermore, it was shown that corporate individuals were more likely to be found in for-profit organisations, and social individuals within community organisations.

It seems that individuals ultimately choose organisations which they believe complement their personal values, rather than indiscriminately selecting any organisation in which to work. This process seems particularly relevant to socially aware individuals. Therefore, organisational choice may be seen as a process which individuals use to reinforce their own values and image of themselves. Although part of this process may reflect objective job factors (this study demonstrated that this was particularly the case for corporate individuals), the values held by the individual nevertheless determines the importance of these objective concerns.

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