

The anthropology of a workplace: the Victorian Land Titles Office

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Thesis summary

This thesis uses a cultural perspective to explore the working life of employees in a government office during the 1980s. During that period three significant changes took place - in the promotion system, in management recruitment and policies, and in the introduction of computer technology. In comparing and contrasting these changes with past practices, we gain an understanding of the relationship between organisational culture and organisational change.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploms.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Evie Katz

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Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s calls for the restructuring of the Australian economy in order to better compete in international markets became more widespread and clamorous. An important way to achieve this restructuring, it was said, was through workplace, or micro-economic, reform. The rhetoric of micro-economic reform was translated by some as 'changing the culture of work'. For the most part this was interpreted as effecting changes in worker attitudes alongside workplace structures.

The thesis, *The Land Titles Office: the anthropology of a workplace*, seeks to understand the nature of the relationship between organisational culture and organisational change. The term 'organisational culture' has been used within a particular paradigm of organisation theory - the consensus paradigm, as described and defined by Alvesson (1987a). Organisational culture research, as a way of understanding organisations, has tended, for the most part, to be preoccupied with social integration, its orientation being both prescriptive and managerial. Its use could be said to have been ideological as much as it has been analytical. As a consequence, the issue for me in this study has been how the term 'organisational culture' is to be interpreted and used.

Do the concept's specific ideological functions mean that its theoretical value is therefore suspect? I will argue that it is possible and helpful to use the term 'culture' as a shorthand term describing certain aspects of working life so long as its problematic aspects are kept in mind. It can offer a way of describing working life; in particular how wider social processes get worked out in micro-worlds. As an explanatory concept, however, its usefulness is debatable.

My interest in the concept of organisational culture has two sources. The first was the experience of working as part of a unit which established and managed basic education classes for people in their workplaces, most of which were middle-to-large size organisations, in both commercial and government sectors. Early on it became clear that the success or failure of these classes often depended on in-depth knowledge of the workplace. More often than not what was needed was knowledge of the 'workplace culture', that is to say, an understanding of a particular work site or organisation. Helpful though existing typologies were,¹ they did not adequately address how or why it was that workplaces differed significantly, despite having common structural

¹ Such as in Etzioni (1961) and Blau & Scott (1962).

features. Something less tangible and visible appeared to be operating. Moreover, emerging data on the unsatisfactory results of information technology systems application to workplaces (Orlikowski, 1988a) also suggested the importance of a deeper understanding.

The second reason for my interest relates to the first in that my chosen field of study was the discipline of anthropology, the principal focus of which is the concept of culture. Its method of participant observation seemed to provide the way of unravelling these vaguer, subtler, more opaque aspects of workplace life. This thesis then, uses the conceptual tools of anthropology and adheres to one of the basic suppositions of the discipline - that there is often a gap between what people say and what people do, between what is, and what is thought ought to be, between normative claims and empirical awareness.

The workplace as the focus of research

The Land Titles Office appeared to promise an interesting case study for a number of reasons. First, members of its staff often used the word 'culture' during negotiations for the establishment of classes. They believed there was such a thing as 'the culture' of the Office; furthermore, certain managers believed it was necessary to change 'the culture' in order for the organisational changes currently underway to succeed, changes they believed would both humanise the workplace and make it more efficient.

Second, during the 1970s and 1980s a good deal of media attention focused on the likely impact of electronic technology upon white-collar occupations. Given that the Land Titles Office had begun the introduction of the new technology, it appeared to be a good site for exploring the effects of such a change, as well as for observing the way in which it was carried out. It was believed by those in charge that the computerisation project would result in the loss of at least eighty jobs in the short-term, and possibly more, since functions would be integrated, effectively halving the number of clerks in the biggest branch of the Office. The impact of technological change proved more difficult to assess than thought, partly because the project took much longer to complete than estimated. Even now the computerisation project remains incomplete. Ironically, although the number of staff in the Office was reduced from approximately 650 in 1989 to around 480 by 1993-4, this reduction was due to other government policies, and could not be attributed to technological change; meanwhile, the new technology has created new jobs within the Land Titles Office.

Land Titles Office staff regarded their workplace as unique, yet it shared certain characteristics with other government agencies. Consequently, any findings were in all probability applicable to other public service workplaces.

All sections and branches of the Office were made accessible to me, including the computer branch where security was tight. No conditions were placed upon either the process of research or the presentation of its findings. This ease of access made the fieldwork experience smoother and more enjoyable.

Research aims

Some of the study's research aims were modified, broadened or jettisoned during the fieldwork period. The principal aim at the beginning, as mentioned before, was to observe the impact of technological change upon social relations within the Office. A few weeks into fieldwork it became clear that while the foremost issue on people's minds was 'change', technological change was of less significance to them than other changes. These were actually materialising rather than being talked about, and they were significant in number, substance and pace. There was widespread agreement among the Office staff - regardless of level, branch or section - as to what these changes were and their significance. There was disagreement, however, about their value and eventual impact.

Consequently the study broadened to include two other key reforms. The question of how prescriptions and theories for improving bureaucratic administration were translated into action became an important focus. Guidelines for this part of the research included looking at intended, unintended and unacknowledged consequences of policy implementation and responses to it. Gradually, it became apparent that a key means of understanding both the past and the present lay in an investigation of informal social activities.

An initial aim of the research was to explore notions of what constituted work within the Titles Office. That such notions were neither fixed nor immutable became evident as the changes proceeded. The new criterion for promotion led to struggles over what constituted worthwhile activity, and difference of opinions over what the work of management actually was and ought to be. In the process of computerisation, there was considerable mystification about what constituted 'skilled' work. For example, talk was generally seen as non-work. Only when it took place within a circumscribed context such as a formal meeting was talk accepted as work. Even then, not everyone considered it to be productive work. Nevertheless, for the most part, it was only the

ritualised procedures of the formal meeting - appointing someone to the chair, deciding the agenda, taking minutes - that signalled to participants and others that conversation was to be taken seriously. Yet, arguably, the talk involved in organising and participating in the social events of the Office also constituted work. It helped create, transmit and shape knowledge, technical and social skills, attitudes and values. Some of the older managers believed that the role played by the social activities in the overall running of the Office was important, although they did not think it could be categorised as work. The newer managers were less convinced that the kind of integrative function these activities provided was helpful to the workplace as a whole. On the contrary, the feeling here was that such activities fostered practices, attitudes and values that needed to be eliminated.

That talk in recreational settings may be more significant to organising than is generally thought, that is to say, that it can be instrumental, can be seen in the following example. For almost a year from mid-1988 to mid-1989 only two senior management meetings were held in the Land Titles Office, meetings which were supposed to take place weekly. During this time, operational decisions were not co-ordinated, decisions on how to put new policies into practice were deferred. Consequently, a friendship group of four middle managers who used to meet regularly for lunch, decided to fill this management hiatus. The group claimed that its informal, undocumented lunch time meetings ensured the smooth running of the Office during that time. For the purpose of the present argument we will accept their claim as genuine, although of course their belief in their role and efficacy may have been mistaken. Their lunch times together did not begin with any instrumental aim in mind. Rather, they met because they had much in common and enjoyed the commensal companionship. It was through the lunch sessions that they came to agree about the management hiatus, and the need for action. As a result they began to act as a cabal. Even when the weekly management committee meetings restarted and there was presumably no longer any need for the *de facto* management group, talk at their lunch time sessions retained its instrumental flavour.

Economic models of work have, in the past, underestimated the degree of trust needed for the process of organising (Arrow, 1974: 23). Such trust is often only developed through everyday interactions over time.² The informal group of managers in the Titles Office which took upon itself a *de facto* decision-making role was able to do so because its members trusted each other. Their existence and actions helps illustrate a basic tenet of the ethnographic approach - the importance of noting what happens in the everyday

² Granovetter (1985) plausibly argues that social relations are necessary but not sufficient for the production of trust. Blau (1964) and Garfinkel (1967) also address this issue.

context in actual social intercourse as against what is purported to occur. It also illustrates a point stressed by Britan & Cohen (1980: 2), namely, that bureaucracy operates through the cultural orientations and social practices that people develop.

Research method

The research questions and aims influenced the choice of method - the use of participant observation, interviews, textual and archival research.

Geertz describes anthropological research as an interpretive activity whose analysis entails the sorting out of structures of significance, what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle called established codes (Geertz, 1973: 9). Geertz borrowed the idea of "thick description" from Ryle and developed it in his own work. "What we call data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Geertz, 1973: 6).

Underlying the interpretivist paradigm is a belief that social reality is constructed and kaleidoscopic. Observations are not value-free, a totally neutral stance is not possible. The role and background of the researcher, as well as her explicit and implicit beliefs and assumptions, must therefore be acknowledged in the story which is finally told.

The aim of the interpretive paradigm is not prediction and control, but understanding - Weber's *verstehen*. Statements are idiographic rather than nomothetic, statistics are descriptive rather than inferential. Such a method looks for recurrent patterns and themes, for redundancy in people's stories, and seeks to elaborate and refine these in terms of theoretical understandings.

From a positivist, empiricist viewpoint the interpretive paradigm is criticised for being too subjective and hence invalid. But, as Bourdieu (cited in Sass 1986: 54) observes, the objectivist paradigm's extolling of the virtues of distance and impartiality transforms the observed into something more static and abstract than it really is.

Organisational ethnography

By definition, organisational ethnography studies relationships derived from the work situation. Early anthropological approaches to the study of organisations in modern industrial societies include the Hawthorne studies carried out in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. At first these consisted of mass interviews - some 21,126 workers (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939: 204). Later, as a result of large numbers of employees losing their jobs in the Depression years, the research revolved around the

repeated interviewing of a much smaller group. This latter research purportedly picked up something the former survey had missed - the degree of peer group control over work behaviour (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939: 379).³ Still later, fieldwork, the hallmark of anthropology, was used to study the Bank Wiring Observation Room, with one researcher remaining in the room as observer, while another interviewed outside the room. Highly influential, the Hawthorne studies continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted. Karl Weick (1985), for example, reached a different conclusion to that of the authors. Upon reading their story of what occurred in the Bank Wiring Room he concluded that, contrary to their finding that people work harder under benign management, it was only after productivity levels rose that the management changed from being punitive to benign. According to Weick, cause and effect had been confused by the original authors and by subsequent interpretations.

In 1943, the anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner⁴ set up a management consultancy to industry using anthropological methods (Wright, 1994: 8). Industrial sociologists were also using participant observation in studies of organisations (Emmet & Morgan, 1982).⁵

During the 1950s and 1960s the Manchester school of anthropology used fieldwork methods to study workplaces, and used anthropological theories for analysis. These studies are notable for the centrality they place on the role of conflict, and on the situational context in which behaviour takes place. In the Third World the context was colonialism, rising nationalism and political independence; anthropological analyses began to include factors such as the formation of state bureaucracies and their role in the processes of modernisation. In so doing, the problem arose of how to relate small-scale, detailed studies to broader social processes.

Limitations of research method

An ethnography usually means a single case study. The two main criticisms of the single case study concern the question of its validity and its lack of generalisability. To guard against opportunistic interpretation, that is, selecting only what I wished to hear, I collected and verified rival explanations by cross-checking with other people elsewhere in the workplace. Interview information was checked against observations, meetings and documents to provide convergent evidence. Also interviewed were non-

³ See, however, Gillespie (1991) who shows how the findings were variously interpreted to emerge as 'knowledge', that is, knowledge constructed by the social, historical and personal concerns of that time.

⁴ Warner also participated in the Hawthorne studies (Gillespie, 1991).

⁵ A good example is Dalton's *Men Who Manage* (1959). Among other findings in his ethnography, Dalton showed the importance of an extensive network of coalitions among managers.

members (searchers, retirees, union officials, ex-employees) for disconfirming data, for elaboration, and for freer information.

A common and valid viewpoint is that the single case study is a weak basis for generalisability, particularly statistical generalisability (Yin, 1989: 21, 43)⁶. However, Bourdieu's argument that the general is to be found in the particular, that is to say, it is a particular case of the possible (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 75), presents another way of looking at what may be gained from the single case study.

Limitations of fieldwork

Good discussions of the limitations of fieldwork in general are found in Van Maanen (1988), Marcus & Fischer (1986) and Clifford & Marcus (1986). Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) discusses these limitations in relation to research within modern, large organisations.

The issues these authors raise are relevant to this study. One is that the end product, the ethnography, freezes narratives in time, whereas the reality is more complex and fluid. People change their views, or hold inconsistent ones. For this reason I have chosen to use the past tense when talking about the Office. More to the point, the pace of change was sufficiently fast to make the use of the past tense appropriate.

The single observer cannot be everywhere at once. Wherever possible I used first-hand observations. In the case of one incident of importance that occurred in my absence, I collected the accounts of several eyewitnesses. The said incident took place on the day that redeployees from elsewhere in the public service were sent to the Titles Office as their new place of employment. The angry confrontation between the Office's union representatives, the newcomers and other Office staff, was a dramatic reminder of the sensitive issues involved in redeployment, especially when it was carried out, as was the case here, with minimal preparation or consultation with those involved.

The ethics of fieldwork in anthropology were discussed in the 1969 and 1971 issues of the journal *Current Anthropology*⁷ and the discussion is still relevant today. I agree in principle with Jorgensen (1971: 329) who argues against clandestine research, seeing it as a violation of one's obligations to one's hosts, and to the misleading of informants.⁸

⁶ Yin (1989: 21, 43) outlines the differences between statistical and analytical generalisability. A case study presented in comparative and generic terms so that it can form part of a larger body of data to inform theory is an instance of analytical generalisability.

⁷ *Current Anthropology*, 1969: 10, 5; 1971: 12, 3.

⁸ There are times when covert research may be ethically justifiable. In making such a decision the researcher is caught between instrumental and value rationality, as depicted by Weber.

For ethical reasons I decided to carry out fieldwork overtly; there were both advantages and disadvantages to this. As a bona fide researcher I had access to all sections of the workplace and did not need to explain why I was there. People were not surprised to see me appear at meetings or social gatherings, though I asked permission to be present. I benefited from people's reflections about their workplace lives, and from their thoughts regarding the accuracy of my own picture. I could check out differing views, and clarify things I did not understand. This was particularly important in the beginning when the work was unfamiliar and its jargon strange.

What I may have missed by opting for open research was brought home to me in the following incident. A supervisor was absent when I introduced myself to staff in his section. I had been doing the work of this section for a few days when he returned. Believing me to be a new employee, his manner to me was patronising and carping. I thereby inadvertently experienced the difference between being treated as a researcher, who enters the workplace with the aura of the university, its authority, status and middle-class connotations, and being treated as a closely supervised, monitored and controlled base-grade clerk.

Being a woman meant not being permitted access to certain social events, meant being apologised to when males swore in my hearing, and to assumptions that I was going to ask the women in the Office about issues like sexual harassment.⁹ Being unfamiliar with pubs, and unable to drink beer to any great extent, made fieldwork a little difficult. Being in a pub felt unnatural to me, and probably appeared so to others, so that when I was with a drinking school from the Titles Office there was no mistaking that I was there only in the role of researcher. Consequently, talk was undoubtedly different from what it might have been had I been able to blend in more easily.

A paramount issue was how to retain the confidentiality of informants and ensure they would not be identifiable, a particularly difficult thing to do given that I would be identifying the workplace in what I wrote. At first I hoped there would be no need to name the workplace but this proved to be infeasible. It was the only office of its kind in the state, and once its work, functions and groups were described it would be recognised. Thus, in order to preserve anonymity, I have treated the material gathered as an evidential base rather than presented individuals 'in the round'. At the same time,

The dilemma involved in choosing between clandestine or open research shows that value-rationality is not always the type that leads to the more ethical result, nor does it always follow that instrumental rationality is the less ethical approach.

⁹ I did not ask specifically about this issue. Women mentioned it nonetheless in the context of being asked if being female affected their life in the Office.

I have tried to ensure that the material is true to the context in which it occurred, and to the senses and meanings which it expressed.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork began in June 1989 and finished March 1990 - a period of nine and a half months. The time was spent doing the actual work of the Office wherever possible - filing, sorting, photocopying, data-entry. Hour-long interviews, mostly semi-structured, were conducted. I observed meetings, committees, participated in and observed a week-long training course for would-be supervisors; participated in and observed numerous social activities and events. I conducted archival research - studying reports and other documents, minutes, memoranda, in-house magazines produced by head office, as well as issues of *Untitled*; a magazine produced by staff in the 1980s; cartoons, sketches and a game called *Titleopoly*, produced by staff members, in addition to historical and work notes written by staff members.

The Land Titles Office consists of four discrete buildings. Three of these are in the central city area, close to one another. The fourth, a small office in Morwell, in the Latrobe Valley, was omitted from this study, because interactions between the majority of employees in the city offices and those in the country one were relatively infrequent.¹⁰ Regional offices established after 1989 were not included in this study.

At the time of fieldwork there were approximately 650 people employed by the Office. Thirty of these were excluded from the study as they were employed at the Morwell site. 160 people were formally interviewed; of these, 134 were current employees of the Office. A breakdown of the length of time employed in the Office is provided in Table 1. The other twenty-six interviewed included searchers, retirees, and people who were not employed in the Office but had some connection to it - see Table 2. A breakdown by gender is provided in Table 3. Twenty-five interviews were recorded on tape, the

¹⁰ Though not included in the study, the endorsing centre in the country town of Morwell was very interesting. The thirty staff, twenty-nine women and one man (who was the manager), had created a workplace environment different from that of their (male) counterparts in the city. The women held elaborate (in terms of the kinds of, and attention paid to, food) daily morning teas lasting about thirty minutes. At lunch times, they were visited by their young children, who were being cared for either in a nearby crèche or by female relatives. The women workers, all clerks doing highly repetitious work with little variety, knew a great deal about each other's lives. They also created a mini-library for themselves. Whenever someone bought a paperback book, she would read it, write a review of it on an attached piece of paper, then place it in a large box. Someone else would borrow the book - all on trust for no records were kept - and add her thoughts and responses about the book on the attached sheet, and return it to the box for the next borrower. Discussions of the most popular books took place during break times to the extent that, as well as being a workplace, the Morwell Endorsing Centre also virtually constituted a book group. From an outsider's perspective the employees seemed a harmonious and closely-knit group. Experience suggests, however, that this impression be treated with caution.

rest by hand. Often, observations were recorded on the train journey home. In the beginning interviews were unstructured, and tended to be long and somewhat rambling. As certain issues and the focus of concern of the employees became more apparent the interviews became shorter, more structured, and between thirty minutes to an hour in length. The formal interviews were adjuncts to chats and observations which took place during tea and lunch breaks, meetings and social events. The time spent talking to people informally, at the coffee shop, in the tea-break, at the wash-basins in the toilets, in pubs after hours, varied. One conversation with a small group in a pub began in the late afternoon and finished several hours later; another conversation took place while waiting for the lift, and only took about five minutes, yet proved particularly useful. Doing the work proved to be one of the best ways to make contact with people, and to get an inkling of what it was like to be a part of the Office.¹¹

I did not aim for representativeness in the formal interviews for they were used as a compensatory technique to collect information from sections in which I was not able to do the work. These included interviews with employees in the Examiners, Survey, Legal, Computer, and Draughting Branches. All but two managers were formally interviewed, a total of fifteen.

This study looks at three significant changes in the working life of people; as ethnography it invites us to explore and savour the lived reality of people, thereby offering an appreciation of how the processes, institutions and structures we label, describe and theorise about, are actually lived out.

While the changes of interest to me originated at the macro-level, their translation to the micro-level was complicated and shaped by factors intrinsic to the workplace. The study, therefore, begins by asking what the salient cultural attributes of the workplace were prior to the 1980s, as perceived by both staff and those 'outsiders' who had connections with the Land Titles Office. It then asks what the relationship was between these attributes and the subsequent reforms? A concomitant question becomes - how have these changes in turn influenced the workplace's cultural attributes, particularly in the eyes of its workers?

¹¹ My justification for interviewing a smaller percentage of women than men rests on the nature of the context in which interviewing took place. Women were concentrated in the sections that were the most closely monitored, and where 'chats' were disapproved of by the supervisors. Many of the women were 'temporary' workers and fearful of losing their jobs if seen talking to me for too long. The women in these sections also did not socialise outside the workplace and often their lunchtimes would be taken up with shopping or paying bills. During the 'writing-up' stage of the study it occurred to me that this justification was inadequate. It has to stand as one of the limitations of the research, but I now wonder about the wisdom of using the interview as a compensatory technique.

Table 1. Interviewees' length of time in Titles Office

Over 20 years	60
10-20 years	41
Less than 10 years	33
Total	134

Table 2. Outsiders (Interviewees not employed in Titles Office)

Retirees	7
Searchers	13
Union official	1
Technician	1
Senior bureaucrats	2
Ex-employees	2
Total	26

Table 3. Breakdown of staff by gender

	<i>Total number in office</i>	<i>No. of formal interviews</i>	<i>Interviews by percentage</i>
Women	186	27	14.5
Men	434	133	30
Total	620	160	25

Chapter outline

In order to answer these questions the study has been divided into two main parts, so as to present a before-and-after type image of the workplace. The first part describes the setting and context of Office life. Chapter one looks at the Office's structure and its functions because we first need to understand the nature of the work and the way it was organised. An organisation's structure only partly determines social relations in the workplace however; conditions of work are influential factors in generating work cultures, but they are not the only ones. An additional factor is the history of any workplace as well as the society in which it is embedded. Chapter two, therefore, deals

with the historical background and origins of the Office, especially British notions and traditions that gave it a particular character.

We then move into the world of the Land Titles Office as it was prior to the 1980s. On the surface what we see is the mundane world of a government agency possessed of little import or significance. But in chapters three and four another picture emerges. We see how people *lived* organisation - in it, around it, and despite it. We see how they created interstices, found crevices where it could not touch them. We explore these via the notion of culture. Chapter five examines this notion whereupon we see its contingent status, so that while employing the concept of culture its usage is at the same time called into question.

The second part of the study concentrates on the changes undergone in the Office during the 1980s. Chapter six looks at the change in the criterion of promotion - from seniority to superior efficiency or merit. Chapter seven discusses changes in ideas about management, in particular the discourses which informed and propelled change. Chapter eight explores the way in which the computerisation project unfolded and was received. The final chapter revisits the notion of 'organisational culture' in the light of what has been learnt about the Titles Office, and makes some concluding observations on the nature of the relationship between organisational culture and organisational change.

It is now time to begin the journey. Before us stands a handsome, beautifully proportioned, nineteenth century building in the heart of law courts and law offices - the legal community of the city of Melbourne. Up the bluestone steps, and beyond the wide doors of carved wood, we find a myriad of rooms and broad corridors that lead to magnificent 'Mahogany Row', the home of the upper echelons. In the opposite direction, wrought iron spiral staircases and narrow corridors take us down to dusty rooms and musty cellars. Within, live poets, musicians, magicians and athletes, all in the guise of dust-coated clerks.