

ÁKOS TÓTH

SALUTOGENESIS IN TRANSCULTURAL MANAGEMENT

Theory and Hypothesis Building

Mayer, C.-H. (2011) *The Meaning of Sense of Coherence in Transcultural Management: A Salutogenic Perspective on Interactions in a Selected South African Business Organisation* (Münster: Waxmann) 24x17 cm, 455 pp., ISBN 978-3-8309-2553-8, €44.90.

Globalisation and the economic crisis makes managers face growing challenges. They are subject to increased work demands, and in transcultural work situations and international organisational structures, they are required to manage diverse interactions; specific new stress sources emerge. All these might present a danger from the perspective of preserving managers' well-being and health. In order to cope with difficulties and preserve their health, managers have to possess specific qualities and strategies. The basic question – what keeps people healthy – which the author herself asks in her study and which she strives to answer is the same as the basic question of the salutogenic model that bears Antonovsky's name. However, she further *extends* it with the question of how we can make people gain the ability – especially in a special surrounding (transcultural industrial company), and on a special level of company hierarchy (managers) – to preserve their health and well-being.

Based on a comprehensive overview of the technical literature on this subject matter, the author places the Sense of Coherence (SOC) of ANTONOVSKY's concept (1979, 1988, 1996) into the focus of her research. 'A strong SOC supports well-being and health and is directly related to aspects of successful living, such as effective work performance, effective interpersonal relationships, community involvement, religious expression and economic and political functioning' (23). She investigates the linking points of SOC with other constructs of the salutogenic paradigm as well as theoretical approaches such as the theory of 'fortitude' (STRÜMPFER 1995), 'internal locus of control', or 'resilience' (LEFCOURT 1976).

For studying the salutogenic perspective in a transcultural milieu, the author opted for a South-African business organisation (automotive industry), where the signs and consequences of globalisation and economic crisis are concentrated. She implements a deep-reaching study in the circle of managers within this transcultural organisation. The author is familiar with this research field, having functioned as an intercultural trainer and advisor in economic organisations in South African countries. During this time, a continuous research work accompanied her practical activity, she published several theoretical and practice-oriented works (see her 23 studies, published from 2001 to 2010, as listed in the references of this book).

Briefly, the aim of this volume, as summarized by the author herself in the abstract of her work, is to answer the following questions: 'How are SOC, identity, organisational culture and transcultural conflict (management) interlinked in an international organisational management context in South Africa? How could managers be qualified to increase their ability to activate resources and develop SOC in a challenging transcultural organisational setting?' Here, she has a double aim: to enrich the salutogenic concept with theoretical knowledge through implementing it in a special field (transcultural organisation) on the one hand, while on the other hand, through and by means of exploring the connections within the managers' sense of coherence, self-evaluation of health, identity and value system, to thereby elaborate an integrated mental health development intervention model that includes counselling, a managerial training series, a team mentoring approach as well as facilitator training.

Methodologically: 'This study employed the phenomenological (hermeneutic) research paradigm, which is subjectivist, interpretative and constructivist in its approach' (123). It employed quantitative methods by using three quantitative questionnaires (again): Antonovsky's (SOC), Schwartz Values Survey (SVS) and organisational culture (OCP). Furthermore, 'Qualitative methods comprised the use of in-depth interviews, observation, and field notes, as well as document and text analysis to collect, analyse and interpret data' (Abstract). She outlines quantitative data only on a descriptive level. She applies a wide arsenal of methods; nevertheless, her statements and conclusions cannot be generalised: 'this study is limited to a single case study and is a product of the time and context: post-Apartheid South Africa in times of financial crisis in the automotive industry' (391).

As a matter of fact, the study has the nature of a problem diagnosis; it leads to the formulation of hypotheses. It contrasts its hypotheses with theoretical knowledge, gaining much valuable insight, and although attempting to support its conclusions also with qualitative data, this could not succeed due to the relatively small number of cases and the questionable representativity of the examined sample (respondents). Therefore this research can be regarded as a pilot study. As such, however, it is a valuable one, although – as a result of certain careless methodological lapses which we have to point out below, urged by our researcher's conscience – some of her main theses are questionable, although we must emphasise her strong points nonetheless. The study provides a rich overview of technical literature within almost all subject matters, and it offers a thorough, all-embracing review of the field regarding research methodology as well as the theoretical background of the research. It refers to a sum of approximately 4,500 volumes, a large part of which is constituted by expounding the results of South-African researches. But within the given subject, she refers to German, British and especially American technical literature as well as reaching back to the beginning of theories.

Contents

Chapter 1 describes in detail the general orientation and subject matters of the volume, the aim of the study, and it gives an overview of the qualitative and quantitative research questions. It outlines the research methods as well as the primary and secondary data sources. It draws both the theoretical and methodological demarcation lines and gives a draft of the structural setup of the whole volume.

Chapter 2 discusses the context of the study, introducing the broader and narrower contexts of the automobile industry, the company's historic development within the global and the actual South-African environment, emphasising the effects of the economic crisis presenting more and more challenges during the time of research.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 expound the theoretical background of the research on 72 pages. Corresponding to the double aim of the research, Chapter 3 expounds the paradigm of salutogenesis in detail, describing and discussing Antonovsky's concept. It introduces its components (such as comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness), emphasising the four appraisals of the construct, namely perception, cognition, behaviour and reappraisal. It defines the idea of General Resistance Resources (GRR) touching upon the salutogenic vs. fortigenic paradigm. The volume displays a comprehensive knowledgeability regarding technical literature. It deserves mentioning that here the author offers a criticism of Antonovsky's concept. The chapter provides the necessary arguments and reasons for the necessity to intervene physically and psychologically in order to develop SOC in individuals.

Chapter 4 focuses on the concerns of cross-cultural management and on their theoretical approaches, later shifting the emphasis more and more from theoretical approaches to practical orientation. It discusses the peculiarities of transcultural and international management, emphasising the managerial competence in conflict management. The management has rather important competencies with regard to personal identity as well. The chapter also expounds organisational and personal intervention strategies, and establishes the new intervention model whose essence is to incorporate salutogenesis and transcultural conflict management competencies with identity and value work.

In Chapter 5 the author introduces the research methodology in detail as well as the applied quantitative and qualitative methods. She describes in detail the validity, creditability, reliability, and objectivity criteria of these methods and the principle of triangulation and crystallisation. Furthermore, she mentions ethical considerations. Then she expounds the aspects of concrete choice of sample, the applied means of research (questionnaires) and the five-step procedure of qualitative data analysis as well as the method of interview evaluation per person.

In this South-African company employing 1,005 persons, 101 out of the 184 members of the leadership were identified as managers, and 27 out of these participated in the interviews (26.7%). The researchers used 'natural sampling procedures' to choose the sample (138) which method is frequently employed in the field of busi-

ness research. The volume presents the research results from Chapter 6 onwards. The socio-demographical data (nationality, position in the organisation, mother tongue and culture, i.e. cultural background) of the 27 persons constituting the managers' sample display a rather great variety.

Unfortunately, there is no way to discover to what extent this variety reflects the corresponding composition of those who did not take part in the research (constituting almost three fourths of the managers), which means there is no information on the representativity of the sample. Therefore it is questionable how much the research results are valid even for the managers of the given company. The presentation of results is abundant but displays a lot of redundancies. The author displays all the value scores of respondents in the charts which were gained by the SOC, SVS and OCP questionnaires. She makes a note of every single person in the charts. In the text she provides the value scores of those respondents who achieved the five highest scores and the five lowest scores respectively. Regarding these she describes their culture group, sex, age group and managerial level one by one. These are interesting and thought-provoking pieces of information but, as a matter of fact, they do not allow a conclusion regarding any of the influencing factors.

Chapter 7 contains the results of the in-depth interviews, ordered according to the given subject matters as well as the researcher's questions, in full detail. Just as until this point, the chapter introduces the contents of the interviews in a didactic structure, summarising and evaluating first the experiences, then the comments.

Chapter 8 discusses the above, going over the quantitative and qualitative research results, attempting to illustrate the complex chain of connections with a multitude of charts. The chapter contains the conclusions drawn from research results and their embodiment into the integrated MEHTO (Mental Health in Transcultural Organisations) intervention model.

The conclusions regarding managers and manager groups ordered according to different aspects (376–77), drawn from data gained by both quantitative and qualitative surveys, are generalisations whose justification was not accomplished in the study in question. The author herself refers to this on pages 391–92, in the chapters bearing the titles 'Limitation of this study' and 'Methodological limitations'. The 'data can neither be used to make quantitative predictions, nor be statistically projected across target groups', as well as 'this study only captured "subjective data" and *emic* perspectives of the selected individuals and did not evaluate "objective data"'. She offers a suggestion of how to overcome the limitation in future research. For example, in order to make generalisation possible, the research should be implemented simultaneously within different companies, with larger sample element numbers. She also suggests planning follow-up research projects to examine the effects of intervention programs. In judging physical health, more metric types should be applied (for example, testing blood pressure, breathing frequencies, etc.). Regarding the establishment of a research project and the fulfilment of these criteria, the results of this study offer valuable information.

In spite of the above, the intervention model (MEHTO) (8.5.) for improving

mental health recommended for mental hygiene professionals which builds on the salutogenic concept in a transcultural milieu will most certainly widen the circle of those means which may prevent the consequences of the several health-damaging stress factors that are present in transcultural management. Regarding the physical form of the volume, the often unjustified detailing of data and the redundancy makes reading rather tiresome, and the information content of certain segments does not account for the more than 400 pages of the full volume.

All in all, Professor Meyer's book is instructive. We agree with STRÜMPFER in that the volume is 'in large part a highly informative work', but it is also true that 'it is not a book without problems'. And although 'the results are not at all generalisable', '[d]espite ambiguity, this is a book that ought to be available in any university or research institute where work is done on the topics indicated above' (2012). The bibliography of this volume as well as its didactic structural setup and methodology (Chapters 1–5) might serve as an example for students attending PhD courses, and certainly for the persons recommending the book, emphasising the generalisation limits of case studies, and precisely drawing the line between the accidental and the general.

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