

# Subjective models

## Central features of subjective models

Subjective models incorporate those approaches which focus on individuals within organizations rather than the total institution or its sub-units. The individual is placed at the centre of the organization. These perspectives suggest that each person has a subjective and selective perception of the organization. Events and situations have different meanings for the various participants in institutions. Organizations are portrayed as complex units which reflect the numerous meanings and perceptions of all the people within them. Organizations are social constructions in the sense that they emerge from the interaction of their participants. They are manifestations of the values and beliefs of individuals rather than the concrete realities presented in formal models. The definition below captures the main elements of these approaches.

Subjective models assume that organizations are the creations of the people within them. Participants are thought to interpret situations in different ways and these individual perceptions are derived from their background and values. Organizations have different meanings for each of their members and exist only in the experience of those members.

Hermes (1999: 198) offers a similar definition in applying subjective models to higher education in Germany, using the term 'construction'

to mean interpretation of events: 'Subjective theories presuppose that human beings are autonomous and reflective beings, actively constructing the world around them'.

Subjective models include phenomenological and interactive approaches. While these perspectives are not identical, they are sufficiently close to be treated together and, indeed, are used interchangeably in much of the literature (Innes-Brown, 1993). Hoyle (1986) defines phenomenology and explains its link with interactionism:

[These] perspectives share certain characteristics which constitute a radically different way of conceiving social reality ... The phenomenological approach gives priority to people and their actions. The social world essentially consists of people interacting with each other, negotiating patterns of relationships and constructing a view of the world. (Ibid.: 10)

Subjective models became prominent in educational management as a result of the work of Thomas Greenfield in the 1970s and 1980s. Greenfield was concerned about several aspects of systems theory which he regarded as the dominant model of educational organizations. He argues that systems theory is 'bad theory' and criticizes its focus on the institution as a concrete reality:

Most theories of organisation grossly simplify the nature of the reality with which they deal. The drive to see the organisation as a single kind of entity with a life of its own apart from the perceptions and beliefs of those involved in it blinds us to its complexity and the variety of organisations people create around themselves. (Greenfield, 1973: 571)

Greenfield's criticism of conventional (largely bureaucratic) theory is even more trenchant in his 1986 article on 'the decline and fall of science in educational administration':

We have a science of administration which can deal only with facts and which does so by eliminating from its consideration all human passion, weakness, conviction, hope, will, pity, frailty, altruism, courage, vice and virtue ... in its own impotence [it] is inward-looking, self-deluding, self-defeating, and unnecessarily boring. (Greenfield, 1986: 61)

Greenfield's work has had a significant impact on theory development in educational management, as Hodgkinson (1993: x) suggests: 'It is not possible to properly comprehend the contemporary discipline of educational administration without some familiarity and acquaintance with the thoughts of Thomas Barr Greenfield'. Greenfield is closely associated with the application of subjective theories to schools and colleges and much of the theory development has come from him, or from others stimulated or provoked by his work. As Evers and

Lakomski (1991: 97) put it, 'no adequate understanding of organisations seems possible without some appeal to human subjectivity, to the interpretations people place on their own actions and those of others'.

Subjective models have the following major features:

1. They focus on the beliefs and perceptions of *individual* members of organizations rather than the institutional level or interest groups. While formal and collegial models stress the total institution, and political models emphasize sub-groups, the individual is at the heart of subjective or phenomenological theories. Subjective models 'focus on the individual and emphasize individual perspectives' (Hermes, 1999: 198).

Within schools and colleges, subjective theorists point to the different values and aspirations of individual teachers, support staff and pupils. They all experience the institution from different stand-points and interpret events and situations according to their own background and motivations. Ribbins et al. (1981) argue that:

The school is not the same reality for all its teachers. Each teacher brings a perspective to the school, and to his place within it, which is to some extent unique. There are ... as many realities as there are teachers. (Ibid.: 170)

The focus on individuals rather than the organization is a fundamental difference between subjective and formal models, and creates what Hodgkinson (1993) regards as an unbridgeable divide:

In the tension between individual and organization ... there is more than a mere dialectical conflict. There can also be a chasm, a Great Divide, an abyss. A fact can never entail a value, and an individual can never become a collective. (Ibid.: xii, original emphases).

Strain (1996) takes a somewhat different view, pointing to the interdependence of individual and collective meanings:

The social world, of which education is an institutional part, spans the ... individual and the ... collectivity. The relationship between the two is reflexive ... The individual, by virtue of his imagining faculty, power to create meanings, cannot act meaningfully in isolation from the symbolically ordered collectivity ... but neither individual nor collectivity can be conceived of as subordinated to or originated by the other. (Ibid.: 51)

2. Subjective models are concerned with the *meanings* placed on events by people within organizations. The focus is on the individual interpretation of behaviour rather than the situations and actions

themselves. According to Greenfield (1975: 83), 'Organisations are to be understood in terms of people's beliefs about their behaviour within them', rather than on the basis of external observations of that behaviour. It is assumed that individuals may have different interpretations of the same event:

What is most important about an event is not what happened but what it means. Events and meanings are loosely coupled: the same events can have very different meanings for different people because of differences in the schema that they use to interpret their experience. (Bolman and Deal, 1991: 244)

To explain any social phenomenon it is necessary to establish the subjective meanings which relevant actors attach to the phenomenon (Best et al., 1983: 58).

In schools there may be differences of interpretation between the head and other staff who often derive divergent meanings from the same event. Hoyle (1981: 45) draws attention to one familiar example of such discrepancies:

When a head talks about his [sic] school on public occasions teachers often remark that they do not recognise the place, and, because this view of reality is different from that of the head's they may assume that he is deliberately misleading. But a phenomenological view would hold that we have here competing realities, the head and the teachers see the world differently with each perspective having its own legitimacy. (Ibid.: 45, original emphasis)

This case illustrates the point that the school or college may be conceptualized differently by the various individuals and groups in the organization. These participants construct a reality out of their interests and any commonality of perspective arises from the fortuitous fact that their interests are held in common (Hoyle, 1986).

In this respect, there are certain similarities between subjective theory and organizational culture. Culture is also an outcome of the meanings and values of the people who inhabit schools and colleges. 'Culture is a useful if intricate and elusive notion. In its broadest sense it is a way of constructing reality and different cultures are simply alternative constructions of reality' (Prosser, 1999: xii). The main difference between these two concepts is that subjective models focus on individual meanings while culture assumes that these coalesce to produce a distinctive whole-school or sub-unit culture. We shall examine culture in more detail in Chapter 8.

3. The different meanings placed on situations by the various participants are products of their *values, background* and *experience*. So the interpre-

tation of events depends on the beliefs held by each member of the organization. Holmes (1986) argues that it is 'bizarre' to develop a theory of educational administration outside a framework of values:

The lack of consensus about the purpose of elementary and secondary schools makes it more important rather than less to have a clear framework of goals and values. The modern idea that schools can function in a value-free atmosphere brings the whole educational profession, and particularly administrators, into disrepute. (Ibid.: 80)

Allix (2000: 13) notes that the separation of objective facts and subjective values has 'had a profound impact on theorizing in educational administration'. Branson (2007: 226) adds that leaders' values closely guide their actions. Drawing on research with primary school principals in Queensland, he claims that 'authentic leaders' need to have self-knowledge of their values.

Strain (1996: 59) argues that 'choice ... is always a subjective affair' and identifies three sets of beliefs in examining the choice behaviour of individuals:

- (a) beliefs about the world; how it works and should work
- (b) beliefs about the chooser's own situation; what is feasible and desirable in relation to a set of actions which seem to be available
- (c) beliefs about a range of desirable outcomes (ibid.: 54).

While leading on the basis of values is widely advocated, it is difficult for principals to substitute their values for those of their national education bodies. In England, for example, headteachers operate within a centralized policy framework (Bottery, 2001).

The scope for leaders to act according to their own values is circumscribed by central power. To disagree is to risk censure by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Leaders are free to pursue their own values only if they are consistent with those of central government. (Bush, 2008: 278)

Greenfield (1979) asserts that formal theories make the mistake of treating the meanings of leaders as if they were the objective realities of the organization:

Life in organisations is filled with contending ideologies ... Too frequently in the past, organisation and administrative theory has ... taken sides in the ideological battles of social process and presented as 'theory' the views of a dominating set of values, the views of rulers, elites, and their administrators. (Ibid.: 103)

One possible outcome of the different meanings placed on events may be conflict between participants. In this respect, subjective models may take on some of the characteristics of political theories. Where meanings coincide, individuals may come together in groups and engage in political behaviour in pursuit of objectives. Greenfield (1986: 72) relates conflict to differences in values: 'Conflict is endemic in organizations. It arises when different individuals or groups hold opposing values or when they must choose between accepted but incompatible values. Administrators represent values, but they also impose them'. In subjective models, then, conflict is regarded as the product of competing values. However, conflict is only one of several possible outcomes and should not be regarded as a norm. Rather the assumption is that meanings are highly personal, often subtle, and subject to the values and experience of participants.

4. Subjective models treat *structure* as a product of human interaction rather than something which is fixed or predetermined. The organization charts which are characteristic of formal models are regarded as fictions in that they cannot predict the behaviour of individuals. Subjective theorists reject the view that people have to conform to the structure of organizations. Rather, they argue that structure derives from what people do.

Subjective approaches move the emphasis away from structure towards a consideration of behaviour and process. Individual behaviour is thought to reflect the personal qualities and aspirations of the participants rather than the formal roles they occupy. Greenfield (1980) claims that the variable nature of human behaviour means that organizations are subject to change:

There is no ultimate reality about organisations, only a state of constant flux. Organisations are at once both the products of action and its cause. We act out of past circumstances and drive towards those we intend for the future. Social realities are constantly created and reshaped. (Ibid.: 40)

Subjective theorists are particularly critical of those models which attribute 'human' characteristics to organizations or regard structure as something independent of its members. In this view, schools and colleges do not have an existence which is separate from the actions and behaviours of their staff, students and stakeholders. 'Organisations exist to serve human needs, rather than the reverse' (Bolman and Deal, 1991: 121).

This subjective perspective on the relative significance of structure and behaviour has implications for the management of

organizations. It suggests that more attention should be given to the theory and practice of staff motivation, and to other aspects of human resource management, and that rather less significance should be attached to issues of organizational structure.

5. Subjective approaches emphasize the significance of individual purposes and deny the existence of organizational *goals*. Greenfield (1973: 553) asks, 'What is an organisation that it can have such a thing as a goal?' The view that organizations are simply the product of the interaction of their members leads naturally to the assumption that individuals, and not organizations, have objectives. The formal model's portrayal of organizations as powerful goal-seeking entities is treated with disdain. In this model, purposes and aims are individual, not organizational. However, Best et al.'s (1983) research on pastoral care in 'Rivendell' school shows that individual meanings clustered into five broad perspectives:

- child-centred
- pupil-centred
- discipline-centred
- administrator-centred
- subject-centred

This research demonstrates that a binary distinction between organizational and individual meanings may be too simplistic and fine-grained analysis needs to allow for clusters of interpretations to emerge.

## Subjective models and qualitative research

The theoretical dialectic between formal and subjective models is reflected in the often lively debate about positivism and interpretivism in educational research. Positivist research, like the formal models, adheres to a scientific approach. People are the objects of research and 'scientific' knowledge is obtained through the collection of verified facts that are essentially 'value free' and can lead to generalizations (Morrison, 2007). 'Explanation proceeds by way of scientific description' (Cohen et al., 2000: 8). In contrast, subjective models relate to a mode of research which is predominantly interpretive or qualitative. This approach to enquiry is based on the subjective experience of individuals. The main aim is to seek understanding of the ways in which individuals create, modify and interpret the social world which they inhabit. It is concerned with meanings more than facts and this is one

of the major differences between qualitative and quantitative research. The link between qualitative research and subjective models is evident in two definitions:

[Qualitative research] stresses the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world ... The principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which he or she finds himself or herself. The approach now takes on a qualitative ... aspect. (Cohen et al., 2000: 7)

All human life is experienced and constructed from a subjective perspective. For an interpretivist, there cannot be an objective reality which exists irrespective of the meanings people bring to it ... Therefore, the data collected and analysed have qualitative rather than quantitative significance. (Morrison, 2007: 27)

The main features of interpretive, or qualitative, research echo those of the subjective models:

1. They focus on the perceptions of *individuals* rather than the whole organization. The subject's individual perspective is central to qualitative research (Morrison, 2007: 20). Interviews, for example, are respondent-centred and have few if any frameworks, so that the participants' meanings can predominate.
2. Interpretive research is concerned with the *meanings*, or interpretations, placed on events by participants. The focus is on individual interpretation rather than the situations or actions themselves. All human life is experienced from a subjective perspective. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 22) note that subjective consciousness has primacy in qualitative research and that 'the central endeavour ... is to understand the subjective world of human experience'.
3. Qualitative research pays much attention to detailed observation, leading to 'rich' and 'deep' description (Morrison, 2007: 27)
4. Research findings are interpreted using 'grounded' theory in contrast to positivist researchers who generally 'devise general theories of human behaviour and [seek] to validate them through the use of increasingly complex research methodologies' (Cohen et al., 2000: 23). The use of theory is very different for interpretive researchers: 'Theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations; it should be "grounded" on data generated by the research act. Theory should not precede research but follow it' (ibid.: 23).

Just as researchers seek the individual perceptions of participants, leaders and managers have to be aware of the individual needs of their colleagues and stakeholders. A recognition of the different values and

motivations of the people who work in, or relate to, schools and colleges, is essential if they are to be led and managed effectively.

## Subjective models: goals, structure, environment and leadership

### *Goals*

Subjective models differ from other approaches in that they stress the goals of individuals rather than the objectives of the institution or its sub-units. Members of organizations are thought to have their own personal aims which they seek to achieve within the institution. The notion of organizational objectives, central to formal and collegial models, is rejected. Teachers and school leaders pursue their own goals, although principals, in particular, may present their personal aims as school purposes. Often, however, they are not concerned with wider institutional issues but reflect the personal wishes of the staff as individuals. Greenfield (1973: 568) argues that, 'Many people do not hold goals ... in the sense of *ends* that the organisation is to accomplish, but merely hold a set of beliefs about what it is *right* to do in an organisation' (original emphases).

The denial of the concept of organizational goals creates difficulties because teachers are usually aware of the purposes and aims of schools and colleges. Many staff acknowledge the existence of school-wide goals such as teaching all children to read or achieving a good record in public examinations. At a common-sense level, these are regarded as organizational objectives.

Greenfield (1973: 557) suggests that goals which appear to be those of the organization are really the objectives of powerful individuals within the institution: 'The goals of the organisation are the current preoccupations and intentions of the dominant organisational coalition'. In schools it is assumed that headteachers may possess sufficient power to promote their own purposes as the objectives of the institution. Organizational goals are a chimera; they are simply the personal aims of the most powerful individuals. In this respect, subjective models are similar to political theories.

Two of the nine English primary schools researched by Bennett et al. (2000) illustrate the view that school aims are really those of the head-teacher:

The head [of Padingwick] was very much a visionary ... [T]he head had a clear view of what needed to be done to improve the school and how this created particular priorities at particular times. He spearheaded a series of improvement initiatives. (Ibid.: 341, 343)

The head [of Elms] was described as a strong leader, who led from the front but was sympathetic to others ... there was a clear sense of direction – to improve standards further and provide a lively and supportive learning environment for children. The head was a key figure in this: she was seen as ‘knowing what she wants for the school’. (Ibid.: 342)

These examples support the subjective view that organizational goals are really the personal aims of influential people within schools and colleges. The subjective model’s emphasis on individual goals is a valuable counter to the formal assumption about ‘organizational’ goals.

Hoyle and Wallace (2005) refer to the tendency to reify schools and add that school policies and ‘visions’ may simply reflect the wishes of the principal. Reification occurs where:

a collectivity such as a school is referred to as if it was a corporate entity capable of corporate action independent of the people who constitute it ... Reification is often allied with the visionary rhetoric now widely expected of school leaders. (Ibid.: 12–13)

They add that vision is usually expressed as the property of an entity (the school) rather than the individual (the headteacher).

### ***Organizational structure***

Subjective models regard *organizational structure* as an outcome of the interaction of participants rather than a fixed entity which is independent of the people within the institution. Structure is a product of the behaviour of individuals and serves to explain the relationships between members of organizations. Formal and collegial models tend to regard structure as a fixed and stable aspect of organizations while subjective theories emphasize the different meanings placed on structure by the individuals within the institution. For example, the senior leadership team might be portrayed as a participative forum by the headteacher but be regarded by other staff as a vehicle for the one-way dissemination of information.

Teachers interpret relationships in schools and colleges in different ways and, in doing so, they influence the structures within their institutions. However, there are variations in the amount of power which individuals can wield in seeking to modify structure. In education, heads and principals are often able to impose their interpretations of structure on the institutions they lead. They can introduce a faculty structure to promote inter-departmental co-operation, for example, but the effectiveness of such a change depends crucially on the attitudes of the staff concerned.

Lumby's (2001) research with English further education colleges demonstrates the complex relationship between organizational structure and the attitudes of managers and staff. She notes that, in the period following major reform in the early 1990s, most colleges had restructured but the motivation for change owed more to managers' desire for control than to any other factor:

The restructuring process followed the appointment of a new principal or a merger, and did not seem to be in response to particular factors but, rather, the principal's vehicle for making a new start, placing people in new roles where they might have a vested interest in supporting the new order. Restructuring can therefore be seen as both a process for response to the external environment and an internal political process of reshaping power. (Lumby, 2001: 89)

Structural change alone may be ineffective if it lacks the support of the people within the organization, as Greenfield demonstrates:

Shifting the external trappings of organisation, which we may call organisation structure if we wish, turns out to be easier than altering the deeper meanings and purposes which people express through organisation ... we are forced to see problems of organisational structure as inherent not in 'structure' itself but in the human meanings and purposes which support that structure. Thus it appears that we cannot solve organisational problems by either abolishing or improving structure alone; we must also look at their human foundations. (1973: 565)

While accepting the strictures of Greenfield about the limitations of structural change, there are obvious difficulties in understanding and responding to numerous personal interpretations of situations in organizations. The elusive and variable nature of human meanings suggests that organizational change may be a slow and uncertain process because it depends primarily on an understanding of individual wishes and beliefs.

Subjective theorists may be more interested in processes and relationships than in structure. While structure relates to the institutional level, subjective models focus on individuals and their interpretations of events and situations. The emphasis is on small-scale issues of concern to people rather than the macro-level of organizational structure: 'The phenomenologist is less concerned with structures than with processes involved at the microcosmic level as groups construct new realities within the framework of relatively enduring institutions' (Hoyle, 1986: 14).

## *The external environment*

In subjective models little attention is paid to relationships between organizations and their *external environments*. This may be because organizations are not portrayed as viable entities. The focus is on the meanings placed on events by people within the organization rather than interaction between the institution and groups or individuals external to it. The notion of outside bodies exerting influence on the school or college makes little sense when subjective models claim that organizations have no existence independent of the individuals within them.

Where subjective models deal with the environment at all, the emphasis is on links between individuals within and outside the organization rather than external pressures on the total institution. The assumption that human behaviour stems from a personal interpretation of events raises the issue of the source of these meanings. Subjective theorists argue that they emanate from the external environment: 'The kinds of organisation we live in derive not from their structure but from attitudes and experiences we bring to organisations from the wider society in which we live' (Greenfield, 1973: 558).

In education, the interpretations of individuals may originate from several sources. For teachers a major influence is the socialization that results from their induction into the profession. The process of socialization may be reinforced through interaction with significant individuals who emanate from the same professional background. These may include other teachers and school leaders, education officers, inspectors and university lecturers. These professional contacts tend to produce shared meanings and values.

Teachers are also subject to personal influences, such as their family, friends and members of clubs and societies external to the school. These sources may lead to a diversity of meanings. Greenfield (1973) prefers to emphasize differences in interpretation rather than shared meanings:

This notion of organisations as dependent upon meanings and purposes which individuals bring to organisations from the wider society does not require that all individuals share the same meanings and purposes. On the contrary, the views I am outlining here should make us seek to discover the varying meanings and objectives that individuals bring to the organisations of which they are a part. (Ibid.: 559)

Formal models stress the accountability of organizations, and senior staff within them, to certain groups and individuals in the external environment. Subjective theories give little attention to this issue but the focus is implicitly on the answerability of individual teachers rather than the

accountability of the institution itself (Bush, 1994). Accountability may be primarily to the individual's own beliefs and values rather than to organizational leaders. While the focus on individual accountability is legitimate, because it is people who act, the subjective model fails to deal with the expectations of external groups and individuals who often require an explanation of institutional policies and practice.

## ***Leadership***

The concept of *leadership* fits rather uneasily within the framework of subjective models. Individuals place different meanings on events and this applies to all members, whatever their formal position in the organization. People who occupy leadership roles have their own values, beliefs and goals. All participants, including leaders, pursue their own interests. A significant difference, however, is that leaders of organizations may be in a position to impose their interpretations of events on other members of the institution. Leadership and management may be seen as forms of control, with heads and principals elevating their meanings to the status of school or college policy. These leaders may use their resources of power to require compliance with these interpretations even where other staff do not share those meanings.

Subjective theorists prefer to stress the personal qualities of individuals rather than their official positions in the organization. Situations require appropriate responses and these may arise from those best suited to address them, regardless of their formal position in the school. This emphasis on the personal attributes of staff suggests that formal roles are an inadequate guide to behaviour. Rather, individuals bring their own values and meanings to their work and interpret their roles in different ways according to their beliefs and experience.

The subjective view is that leadership is a product of personal qualities and skills and not simply an automatic outcome of official authority. However, positional power also remains significant. Perhaps the most effective leaders are those who have positional power *and* the personal qualities to command the respect of colleagues, a combination of the formal and subjective perspectives.

## **Postmodern leadership**

The notion of postmodern leadership aligns closely with the principles of subjective models. This is a relatively recent model of leadership

which has no generally agreed definition. For example, Starratt's (2001: 334) discussion of 'a postmodern theory of democratic leadership' does not define the concept beyond suggesting that postmodernism might legitimize the practice of democratic leadership in schools.

Keough and Tobin (2001: 2) say that 'current postmodern culture celebrates the multiplicity of subjective truths as defined by experience and revels in the loss of absolute authority'. They identify several key features of postmodernism:

- Language does not reflect reality.
- Reality does not exist; there are multiple realities.
- Any situation is open to multiple interpretations.
- Situations must be understood at local level with particular attention to diversity (ibid.: 11–13).

Similarly, Sackney and Mitchell (2001) refer to 'widely divergent meanings' (ibid.: 6) and to 'alternative truth claims' (ibid.: 9). They add that power is located throughout the organisation and 'enacted by all members' (ibid.: 11), leading to empowerment.

Grogan and Simmons (2007) stress that postmodern leadership developed as a reaction to theories presented as having universal application, such as several of the formal or scientific theories, and show its links to the subjective model:

- Central to most post-modern theories is an interest in language, subjectivity and meaning ... researchers taking a postmodern stance would shy away from utilising grand or formal theories in their work ... a postmodern stance on educational leadership questions the very notion of seeking truth and objectivity in research. (ibid.: 39)

The postmodern model offers few clues to how leaders are expected to operate. This is also a weakness of the parallel Greenfield (1973) model. The most useful point to emerge from such analyses is that leaders should respect, and give attention to, the diverse and individual perspectives of stakeholders. They should also avoid reliance on the hierarchy because this concept has little meaning in such a fluid organization. Starratt (2001) aligns postmodernity with democracy and advocates a 'more consultative, participatory, inclusionary stance' (ibid.: 348), an approach which is consistent with collegiality (see Chapter 4).

Sackney and Mitchell (2001: 13–14) stress the centrality of individual interpretations of events while also criticizing transformational leadership as potentially manipulative: 'Leaders must pay attention to the cultural and symbolic structure of meaning construed by individuals and groups ... postmodern theories of leadership take the focus off vision and place it

squarely on voice'. Instead of a compelling vision articulated by leaders, there are multiple visions and diverse cultural meanings.

## Emotional leadership

Crawford (2009) demonstrates the links between the emerging notion of emotional leadership and the subjective model. She stresses that emotion is concerned with individual motivation and interpretation of events, rather than emphasizing the fixed and the predictable, and criticizes much of the current literature on leadership for underestimating this dimension:

The educational leadership literature rarely considers headship from the perspective of the headteacher – in other words, ‘what does it feel like to be in that role?’. This is probably because such subjectivity is viewed, in an accountability culture, as suspect. I would argue that understanding the emotions of leadership is a key to long-term sustainability and high functioning in headship. (Ibid.: 15)

Crawford (2009) adds that emotion is socially constructed and stresses the importance of individual interpretations of events and situations: ‘perception is reality’.

Beatty (2005: 124) also notes the importance of emotional leadership and contrasts it with bureaucratic approaches: ‘When I look at Weber’s iron cage of bureaucracy ... I see rungs of emotional silence. Emotional silence may be the most powerful self-replicating mechanism of bureaucratic hierarchy – in schools and elsewhere’. She adds that hierarchical stratifications and silos of specialization are anathema to the creation of dynamic learning communities. ‘To overcome the anachronistic view of leadership as located exclusively at the top is itself an emotional challenge’ (ibid.: 125). Crawford (2009: 164) concludes that ‘educational leadership cannot, and does not, function without emotion’.

## The limitations of subjective models

Subjective models are prescriptive approaches in that they reflect beliefs about the nature of organizations rather than presenting a clear framework for analysis. Their protagonists make several cogent points about educational institutions but this alternative perspective does not represent a comprehensive approach to the management of schools and colleges. Subjective models can be regarded as ‘anti-

theories' in that they emerged as a reaction to the perceived limitations of the formal models. Similarly, interpretivist approaches to research may be seen as anti-positivist (Morrison, 2007). Greenfield is zealous in his advocacy of subjective approaches and his rejection of many of the central assumptions of conventional organizational theory.

Although subjective models introduce several important concepts into the theory of educational management, they have four significant weaknesses which serve to limit their validity:

1. Subjective models are *strongly normative* in that they reflect the attitudes and beliefs of their supporters. Greenfield, in particular, has faced a barrage of criticism, much of it fuelled by emotion rather than reason, for his advocacy of these theories. As long ago as 1980, Willower claimed that subjective models are 'ideological':

[Phenomenological] perspectives feature major ideological components and their partisans tend to be true believers when promulgating their positions rather than offering them for critical examination and test ... The message is being preached by recent converts who ... now embrace it wholeheartedly and with the dedication of the convert. (Willower, 1980: 7)

This comment serves to illustrate the intensity of feelings engendered by Greenfield's challenge to conventional theory. Nevertheless, there is substance in Willower's criticism. Subjective models comprise a series of principles, which have attracted the committed support of a few adherents, rather than a coherent body of theory: 'Greenfield sets out to destroy the central principles of conventional theory but consistently rejects the idea of proposing a precisely formulated alternative' (Hughes and Bush, 1991: 241).

2. Subjective models seem to assume the existence of an *organization* within which individual behaviour and interpretation occur but there is no clear indication of the nature of the organization. It is acknowledged that teachers work within a school or college, but these bodies are not recognized as viable organizations. Educational institutions are thought to have no structure beyond that created by their members. The notion of school and college objectives is dismissed because only people can have goals. So organizations are nothing more than a product of the meanings of their participants. In emphasizing the interpretations of individuals, subjective theorists neglect the institutions within which individuals behave, interact and derive meanings.

3. Subjective theorists imply that *meanings* are so individual that there may be as many interpretations as people. In practice, though, these meanings tend to cluster into patterns which do enable participants and observers to make valid generalizations about organizations. The notion of totally independent perceptions is suspect because individual meanings depend on participants' background and experience. Teachers, for example, emanate from a common professional background which often results in shared meanings and purposes. As noted earlier, perceptions of pastoral care at 'Rivendell' clustered into five broad perspectives (Best et al., 1983). Activities in schools cannot simply be reduced to a series of individual interpretations.

Subjective models also fail to explain the many similarities between schools. If individual perceptions provide the only valid definitions of organizations, why do educational institutions have so many common features? A teacher from one school would find some unique qualities in other schools but would also come across many familiar characteristics. This suggests that there is an entity called a 'school' which may evoke similar impressions amongst participants and observers.

4. A major criticism of subjective models is that they provide few guidelines for managerial action. Leaders are left with little more than the need to acknowledge the individual meanings placed on events by members of organizations. Formal models stress the authority of heads to make decisions while pointing to the need to acknowledge the place of official groups such as management teams and governing bodies. Collegial models emphasize the desirability of reaching agreement with colleagues and providing opportunities for participation in decision-making. Political models accentuate the significance of building coalitions among interest groups in order to ensure support for policy proposals. Subjective models offer no such formula for the development of leadership strategies, but the focus on the individual may provide some guidance. The leader may seek to influence individual behaviour through the application of motivation theory in order to produce a better 'fit' between the participant's personal wishes and the leader's preferences. This stance may help leaders but it is much less secure than the precepts of the formal model. As Greenfield (1980: 27) acknowledges: 'This conception of organisations does not make them easy to control or to change'.

## Conclusion: the importance of the individual

The subjective model has introduced some important considerations into the debate on the nature of schools and colleges. The emphasis on the primacy of individual meanings is a valuable aid to our understanding of educational institutions. A recognition of the different values and motivations of the people who work in organizations is an essential element if they are to be managed successfully. Certainly teachers are not simply automatons carrying out routine activities with mechanical precision. Rather, they deploy their individual skills and talents for the benefit of pupils and students.

The subjective model is also valuable in providing conceptual underpinning for interpretive research methodology. The focus on the individual perceptions of actors is at the heart of qualitative research. Similarly, subjective models have close links with the emerging, but still weakly defined, notion of postmodern leadership, as well as the developing sub-field of emotional leadership. Leaders need to attend to the multiple voices in their organizations and develop a 'power to' not a 'power over' model of leadership. However, as Sackney and Mitchell (2001: 19) note, 'we do not see how postmodern leadership ... can be undertaken without the active engagement of the school principal'. In other words, the subjective approach works only if leaders wish it to work, a fragile basis for any approach to educational leadership.

Subjective models provide a significant new slant on organizations but the perspective is *partial*. The stress on individual interpretation of events is valid but ultimately it leads to a blind alley. If there are as many meanings as teachers, as Greenfield claims, our capacity to understand educational institutions is likely to be fully stretched. If individual meanings are themselves subject to variation according to the context, as Sackney and Mitchell (2001: 8) suggest, then the number of permutations is likely to be overwhelming. In practice, however, interpretations do cluster into patterns, if only because shared meanings emerge from the professional socialization undergone by teachers during training and induction. If there are common meanings, it is possible to derive some generalizations about behaviour.

The subjective perspective does offer some valuable insights which act as a corrective to the more rigid features of formal models. The focus on individual interpretations of events is a useful antidote to the uniformity of systems and structural theories. Similarly, the emphasis on individual aims, rather than organizational objectives, is an important contribution to our understanding of schools and colleges. Greenfield's work has broadened our understanding of educational institutions and exposed the weaknesses of the formal models. His admirers stress the significance of his contribution to organizational theory:

Greenfield ... has almost single-handedly led a generation of educational administration theorists to a new perspective on their work. It seems indisputable that a decade from now ... Greenfield's work will be regarded as truly pioneering. (Crowther, 1990: 15)

To understand Greenfield, whether one agrees with him or not, is to understand the nature of organizational reality better and to be better able to advance the state of the art. (Hodgkinson, 1993: xvi)

Despite these eulogies, it is evident that subjective models have supplemented, rather than supplanted, the formal theories Greenfield set out to attack. While his focus on individual meanings is widely applauded, the notion of schools and colleges as organizational entities has not been discarded. There is a wider appreciation of events and behaviour in education but many of the assumptions underpinning the formal model remain dominant in both theory and practice.

The search for a synthesis between formal models and Greenfield's analysis has scarcely begun. One way of understanding the relationship between formal and subjective models may be in terms of scale. Formal models are particularly helpful in understanding the total institution and its relationships with external bodies. In education, the interaction between schools and national or local government may be explained best by using bureaucratic and structural concepts. However, the subjective model may be especially valid in examining individual behaviour and relationships between individuals. Formal and subjective models thus provide complementary approaches to our understanding of organizations. The official structure of schools and colleges should be examined alongside consideration of the individual behaviour and perceptions of staff and students. While institutions cannot be understood fully without an assessment of the meanings of participants, these interpretations are of limited value unless the more formal and stable aspects of organizations are also examined.

## References

- Allix, N. (2000) 'Transformational leadership: democratic or despotic?', *Educational Management and Administration*, 28(1): 7–20.
- Beatty, B. (2005) 'Emotional leadership', in B. Davies (ed.), *The Essentials of School Leadership*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Bennett, N., Crawford, M., Levačić, R., Glover, D. and Earley, P. (2000) 'The reality of school development planning in the effective primary school: technicist or guiding plan?', *School Leadership and Management*, 20(3): 333–51.
- Best, R., Ribbins, P., Jarvis, C. and Oddy, D. (1983) *Education and Care*, London: Heinemann.
- Bolman, L. and Deal, T. (1991) *Reframing Organisations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Bottery, M. (2001) 'Globalisation and the UK competition state: no room for transformational leadership in education', *School Leadership and Management*, 21(2): 199–218.
- Branson, C. (2007) 'Effects of structured self-reflection on the development of authentic leadership practices among Queensland primary school principals', *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 35(2): 225–46.
- Bush, T. (1994) 'Accountability in education', in T. Bush and J. West-Burnham (eds), *The Principles of Educational Management*, Harlow: Longman.
- Bush, T. (2008) 'From management to leadership: semantic or meaningful change', *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 36(2): 271–88.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2000) *Research Methods in Education*, 5th edn, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Crawford, M. (2009) *Getting to the Heart of Leadership: Emotion and Educational leadership*, London: Sage.
- Crowther, F. (1990) 'The pioneers in administration', *Practicing Administrator*, 12(3): 14–15.
- Evers, C. and Lakomski, G. (1991) 'Educational administration as science: a post-positivist proposal', in P. Ribbins, R. Glatter, T. Simkins and L. Watson (eds), *Developing Educational Leaders*, Harlow: Longman.
- Greenfield, T.B. (1973) 'Organisations as social inventions: rethinking assumptions about change', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 9(5): 551–74.
- Greenfield, T.B. (1975) 'Theory about organisations: a new perspective and its implications for schools', in M. Hughes (ed.), *Administering Education: International Challenge*, London: Athlone Press.
- Greenfield, T.B. (1979) 'Organisation theory is ideology', *Curriculum Enquiry*, 9(2): 97–112.
- Greenfield, T.B. (1980) 'The man who comes back through the door in the wall: discovering truth, discovering self, discovering organisations', *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 16(3): 26–59.
- Greenfield, T.B. (1986) 'The decline and fall of science in educational administration', *Interchange*, 17(2): 57–80.
- Grogan, M. and Simmons, J. (2007) 'Taking a critical stance in research', A. Briggs and M. Coleman (eds), *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*, 2nd edn, London: Sage.
- Hermes, L. (1999) 'Learner assessment through subjective theories and action research', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(2): 197–204.
- Hodgkinson, C. (1993) 'Foreword', in T.B. Greenfield and P. Ribbins (eds), *Greenfield on Educational Administration*, London: Routledge.
- Holmes, M. (1986) 'Comment on "The decline and fall of science in educational administration"', *Interchange*, 17(2): 80–90.
- Hoyle, E. (1981) *The Process of Management, E323 Management of the School, Block 3, Part 1*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hoyle, E. (1986) *The Politics of School Management*, Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Hoyle, E. and Wallace, M. (2005) *Educational Leadership: Ambiguity, Professionals and Managerialism*, London: Sage.
- Hughes, M. and Bush, T. (1991) 'Theory and research as catalysts for change', in W. Walker, R. Farquhar and M. Hughes (eds), *Advancing Education: School Leadership in Action*, London: Falmer Press.

- Innes-Brown, M. (1993) 'T. B. Greenfield and the interpretive alternative', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 7(2): 30–40.
- Keough, T. and Tobin, B. (2001) 'Postmodern leadership and the policy lexicon: from theory, proxy to practice', paper for the Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda Symposium, Quebec, May.
- Lumby, J. (2001) *Managing Further Education: Learning Enterprise*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Morrison, M. (2007) 'What do we mean by educational research?', in A. Briggs and M. Coleman (eds), *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*, 2nd edn, London: Sage.
- Prosser, J. (1999) 'Introduction', in J. Prosser (ed.), *School Culture*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Ribbins, P.M., Jarvis, C.B., Best, R.E. and Oddy, D.M. (1981) 'Meanings and contexts: the problem of interpretation in the study of a school', *Research in Educational Management and Administration*, Birmingham: British Educational Management and Administration Society.
- Sackney, L. and Mitchell, C. (2001) 'Postmodern expressions of educational leadership', in K. Leithwood and P. Hallinger (eds), *The Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Starratt, R.J. (2001) 'Democratic leadership theory in late modernity: an oxymoron or ironic possibility?', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 4(4): 333–52.
- Strain, M. (1996) 'Rationality, autonomy and the social context of education management', *Educational Management and Administration*, 24(1): 49–63.
- Willower, D.J. (1980) 'Contemporary issues in theory in educational administration', *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 16(3): 1–25.