

~~that management could not tolerate such a lengthy unproductive phase and their experience was that teams can 'gel' very quickly.~~

~~This study is ongoing and has lead to the work of psychologists in researching the ability of people to make seemingly accurate assessments of others in seconds rather than months and decide if they can work together. An aspect of this area of interpersonal relating is the Pygmalion effect – that is, that people respond to others in the way they are expected to.~~

~~I had an opportunity in late 2005 to test my approach to characterising projects as social systems when I delivered a one-week course to students of the masters degree in project management from the Australian Department of Defence. These 15 students were at middle management level and were experienced project managers. They readily accepted my approach and, through many interactive discussions, I formed the view that they 'knew' much about what I was talking but it was tacit knowledge that only became explicit in discussions. Their difficulty in a highly structured and 'processified' organisation was to justify decisions and opinions made on the basis of that tacit knowledge. My role evolved towards providing them with information on the importance of tacit knowledge and making that knowledge explicit. Their final assignments were so informative that I have undertaken to publish them as an edited book.~~

~~A final comment is that my research program crosses several disciplinary boundaries. Transdisciplinary research is not easy for many reasons. Yet I believe that my research has demonstrated how necessary it is particularly at this stage of Western society when so many institutions are showing signs of distress. Remedies do not seem to be forthcoming from the 'stove-piped' domains and disciplines that evolved in the era following the Industrial Revolution.~~

RESEARCH REPORT

Organisational learning about depression in the workplace: a community of practice of silence and avoidance

Lisa Davies
Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work
University of South Australia

The economic and social impact of depression on the Australian workforce (Hickie 2002; Hawthorne, Cheok, Goldney and Fisher 2003) is only recently being acknowledged. In 2004 I undertook semi-structured interviews with people with human resource responsibilities in the deregulated sector of information technology in South Australia. The interviews focused on their accessibility to work-based education about depression and asked their opinions regarding the merit of such education. As I also wanted to conceptualise what is understood about depression and to seek insight into what their understandings are of prevailing attitudes in their workplaces

about workers with depression, I drew upon a methodological perspective from the field of organisational behaviour and undertook a qualitative, interpretive method of analysis. I was interested in investigating what tacit and/or overt 'social learning' was occurring on the value of education about depression in the workplace and qualitative research methods provided me with the ability to explore, understand and explain the participants' social work-world. I made observations about their workplaces, noted indicators of workplace cultures and gathered artefacts to gain some comprehension of where and how people had learned their constructs about depression, with the intention of proposing what could be developed and used in the workplace in addition to what was currently available, or perceived to be available, to ameliorate their apparent current lack of literacy about the topic. I undertook a further thematic analysis to enhance my understanding of the discourses that shape and are inherent in the organisational cultures in the environments in which this research was situated.

Emerging themes

As education about recognising depression and stress as real and manageable can enable increased participation in mutually understood and agreed processes for interventions or prevention, it would seem important for people with personnel responsibilities, managers, and employees and employers in general, to be able to recognise various forms of depression in their employees. However, it appears that this is not always the case. The people in this research were under-educated about the impact of depression in the workplace, and unfamiliar with sources of relevant information. Moreover, the relevance of this education was disenfranchised in several of these workplaces, being considered not work-related and not of interest to technical employees. I also asked interviewees what they perceived to be their colleagues' and peers' thoughts about those matters. What emerged was a generalised ignorance, pejorative

labelling and stigma generated by anachronistic stereotypes. These were workplaces in which disenfranchising behaviour and practices are currently tacitly endorsed.

I explored the pedagogical practices and organisational learning which emerged as inherent in their organisational ethos. What transpired was a persistent and underlying disquiet about the impact that depression may have on a person's 'performance' (that is, work productivity) reflecting a prevailing business concern of economic stability which was interwoven with an anxiety about the 'legal' side of 'dealing' with people with depression. The intrinsic goal of these organisations was their continued survival through the labour and productivity potential of employees; managers supported only very specific, technically-oriented education in order to maintain the economic viability of their organisations in what they regarded as the most expedient way. In their pursuit of this, many of the managers in these organisations articulated concerns about supporting the 'weaker' [*sic*] links, the people with 'problems' (those who were ill or depressed) in their organisations and considered them to be fraught with difficulties. Most justified this by explaining that, while their organisation had a duty of care to people, they also had competing business interests; they had to justify any educational activity as being relevant to their 'bottom line' in order for it to occur. Few perceived that assisting staff who were depressed may in fact assist that bottom line in terms of increasing morale or workplace satisfaction through prevention or hastened recovery and return to increased levels of economic productivity.

When asked about what they perceived their colleagues' beliefs about depression to be, many articulated variations of the notion that most of their employees were 'too private' or 'too introverted' either to delve into other people's emotional states or problems or to discuss their own 'problems' in the workplace. That depression was not something that was talked about in these workplaces was consistent

across organisations and some of the managers whom I interviewed described themselves as sharing this trait. It would seem likely that this managerial discomfort with the topic could only exacerbate the lack of support for work-based education about depression. Furthermore, many described their preference for a practice of 'employing for fit' – choosing employees who would continue the prevailing cultural climate in which private, non-intrusive behaviours were described as the prevailing norm – 'the way we do things here'.

The nature of communities of practice

I am currently exploring the notion that this tacit, mutual and widespread avoidance of discussion about depression could reflect a form of learning which is associated with being engaged with a community of practice. In brief, Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger and Snyder (2000: 139) and Wenger (1999: 32) define communities of practice as groups of people formed around shared interests who come together informally for mutual benefit. Of particular interest to me is the proposal that communities of practice also share ideas and insights that are tacit or difficult to describe (McDermott 2000). This concept of tacit learning occurring in communities of practice is possibly reflected in the prevailing and shared lack of discussion about personal matters, the minimising of the value of education about depression in the workplace and the unspoken disquiet about depression – its existence or even validity – described by the interviewees. Furthermore, while the literature refers to communities of practice as being a process by which organisations and groups can increase their effectiveness (Allee 2000, McDermott 2000), James (2002) notes that Lave and Wenger's proposals could also suggest that the learning in some communities of practice can reflect workplace practices which are for the convenience of the organisation, rather than for an increase in comprehension, knowledge or personal (and hence organisational) effectiveness. The pervasive, tacit and mutually supported notions of avoidance of discussion about

depression in the workplace may reflect some components of the learning associated with engagement within a community of practice.

References

- Allee, V. (2000). 'Knowledge networks and communities of practice', *Organizational Development Practitioner*, 32(4), Organization Development Network, www.odnetwork.org/odonline/Vol32n4/knowledgenets.html [accessed 24 September 2005].
- Hawthorne, G., Cheok, F., Goldney, R., Fisher, L. (2003). 'The excess cost of depression in South Australia: a population based study', *Australia New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 37(3), pp. 362–373, PMID: 12780477 [PubMed - indexed for MEDLINE], www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1046/j.1440-1614.2003.01189.x [accessed 12 March 2006].
- Hickie, I. (2004). 'Can we reduce the burden of depression? The Australian experience with beyondblue; the national depression initiative', *Australasian Psychiatry: Bulletin of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists*, 12, suppl.S 38-46 PMID 15715829 [PubMed - indexed for MEDLINE], www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?CMD=Display&DB=pubmed [accessed 24 September 2005].
- James, D. (2002). 'Towards a useful notion of learning culture', British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, 12–14 September 2002, www.education.ex.ac.uk/tlc/docs/publications/BR_DJA_PUB_12.09.02.doc [accessed 3 February 2006].
- Lave J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDermott, R. (2000). 'Knowing in community: 10 critical success factors in building communities of practice', *IHRIM Journal*, March.
- Wenger, E. (1999). 'Learning as social participation: Why we must change our assumptions about how we learn and share knowledge', *Knowledge Management Review*, 6, January/February, pp. 30–33.
- Wenger, E. & Snyder, W. (2000). 'Communities of practice: The organizational frontier', *Harvard Business Review*, January–February, pp. 139–145.