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Antecedents, Moderators and Examples of Representational Predicaments at Three Hong Kong Sites

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ANTECEDENTS, MODERATORS AND EXAMPLES OF REPRESENTATIONAL PREDICAMENTS AT THREE HONG KONG SITES

ABSTRACT

Employees suffer representational predicaments if they feel that they bear invisible burdens and/or make invisible contributions. This feeling implies a belief that dominant authorities in the organization are embracing unfavourable prevailing images of employees (PIEs) that are incongruent with salient work-life space domains. Qualitative interviews at an insurance agency branch and an on-line database provider indicated embedded human resource values characterized by aggressive instrumentality, small circle and top down governance, and expectations of employee deference and silence. These values reflected the Hong Kong human resource governance environment: absence of labour rights and protections, and cultural assumptions of large power distance, high masculinity and network-orientation. Our grounded model proposes that these antecedents led to representational climates that were not characterized by high-fidelity meritocracy, in turn exposing employees to the risk of representational predicaments. Individuals' compatibility with embedded values and their relational proximity to dominant authorities appeared to reduce this risk, while proximal appreciation/support and diligent beliefs appeared to offset distress arising from representational predicaments. At a third site, the administrative side of a tertiary education institute, dominant authorities' non-conformist values and best practice open governance benchmarking appeared to moderate the impact of the Hong Kong human resource governance environment, leading to relatively high-fidelity meritocracy and less risk of representational predicaments.

Descriptors: Representational predicaments, invisibility, values, Hong Kong.
INTRODUCTION

Through a qualitative interview study of three Hong Kong organizations, we derived three concepts, ‘prevailing images about employees’ (PIEs), ‘representational climates’ and ‘representational predicaments’, and theorized a link between them.

We came to define PIEs as the images that are held by dominant authorities within an organization about the inputs and burdens of individual employees, of groups of employees, or of the workforce as a whole. In organizations where PIEs are determined top-down, and from a distance, they are unlikely to embrace the full richness of the proximal (close-up and on-the-ground) job situation (Argyris 1978). In Western corporations, one manifestation of this is the disparity between what practitioners regard as the ‘real work’ (Orr 1990, 1996), and what is prescribed in canonical documentation such as operating manuals (Blackler 1995: 1025). We took the opportunity, at one of our research sites, an insurance agency attached to a Hong Kong subsidiary of a multinational financial corporation, to examine whether there was a similar disparity between canonically articulated performance indicators and practitioners’ perceptions of the nature of their work.

Since canonical documentation is relatively scarce even in medium-sized Hong Kong Chinese-run organizations (Redding 1990), a more general concern is whether there is a disparity between PIEs, which may also be implicit and intuitive rather than formally documented, and grassroots perceptions of work related domains in Hong Kong. Given that local cultural values assume asymmetrical rights and large power distance between superiors and subordinates (Wong and Birnbaum-Moore 1994), we expected to find a disparity. Furthermore, we expected this disparity between PIEs and grassroots perceptions to apply across various work-life space domains, including work-impacted non-work domains.

We developed the concept of representational climates as the organizational atmosphere of fairness and accuracy in relation to the gathering and processing of human resource information about employees. Figure 1 indicates two dimensions of representational climates. One of these is the extent to which PIEs comprehensively represent the work-life space domains that are salient to employees. To the extent that dominant authorities acknowledge employees’ contributions, hazards and sacrifices, and employees’ moral rights in relation to all work-life space domains, the selection of employee work-life space domains featuring in
PIEs can be considered as comprehensive. The other key dimension of representational climates concerns the extent to which the work-life space domains featuring in PIEs are accurately assessed. Figure 1 thus identifies four representational climates:

- High fidelity meritocracy, where PIEs comprehensively represent and accurately assess employees’ work-life space domains.
- Totalizing fiat, where PIEs comprehensively represent but inaccurately assess employee work-life space domains.
- Pseudo-meritocracy, where PIEs partially represent employee work-life space domains, but accurately assess those that are selected.
- Arbitrary fiat, where PIEs partially represent and inaccurately assess employee work-life space domains.

**Figure 1. Conceptual model of representational climates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection of employee work life space domains featuring in PIEs</th>
<th>Totalizing Fiat</th>
<th>High-fidelity Meritocracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Partial Inaccurate准确</td>
<td>Arbitrary Fiat</td>
<td>Pseudo-meritocracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We theorize that representational climates that are characterized by totalizing fiat, pseudo-meritocracy, or arbitrary fiat are likely to give rise to representational predicaments. Representational predicaments arise when employees believe that the PIEs to which they are subject are both unfavorable and lack psychological fidelity, i.e. that PIEs fail to encapsulate ‘reality’ as seen by job incumbents, to their disadvantage. High fidelity PIEs that are favorable do not constitute representational predicaments. Nor do low fidelity PIEs that are favorable, as may happen under cronyism (Khatri and Tsang 2003), or when guanxi ties or relational networks connect an employee to the strategic apex (Wong and Leung 2001),
and/or if employees successfully engage in ingratiation or exemplification (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). High fidelity PIEs that are unfavorable do not constitute representational predicaments, because they accord with the employee’s perception of the situation.

Data from our three sites enabled us to develop a broader theoretical model, given in Figure 2. This identifies extra-organizational and intra-organizational antecedents to representational predicaments, and posits a likely end consequence, all denoted by continuous lines in Figure 2. The model also proposes factors that may moderate the antecedents of representational predicaments or their impact, denoted by dotted lines. According to the model:

- Human resource governance environments characterized by a lack of labour rights and protections and by cultural assumptions of large power distance, high masculinity and network-orientation are extra-organizational antecedents of representational predicaments.
- Embedded human resource values that are characterized by aggressive instrumentality, by small circle and top down governance, and by expectations of employee deference and silence are intra-organizational antecedents of representational predicaments.
- Distress is a consequence of representational predicaments.
- Non-conformist values among dominant authorities, and best practice open governance benchmarking are moderators of the extra-organizational antecedents of representational predicaments.
- Compatibility with embedded values and relational proximity to dominant authorities are individual-level situational moderators of the intra-organizational antecedents of representational predicaments.
- Proximal appreciation and support and diligent beliefs are further moderators of the impact of representational predicaments.

Extra-Organizational Antecedents

According to Figure 2, overleaf, representational predicaments are more likely to arise in the absence of labour rights and protections, and when cultural values assume large power distance, high masculinity and network-orientation. These conditions apply in Hong Kong,
Figure 2. Antecedents, moderators and consequences of representational predicaments

**EXTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL ANTECEDENTS**
- Absence of labour rights & protections
- Cultural assumptions: large power distance, high masculinity, network-orientation
- Best practice open governance benchmarking

**INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL MODERATOR & ANTECEDENTS**
- Embedded human resource values: instrumentality, small circle, top-down governance, employee deference and silence
- Values of the dominant authorities values (if non-conformist)

**REPRESENTATIONAL CLIMATE**
- Pseudo-meritocracy, or totalizing or arbitrary fiat vs. high fidelity meritocracy

**INDIVIDUAL LEVEL SITUATIONAL MODERATORS**
- Compatibility with embedded values
- Relational proximity to dominant authorities

**REPRESENTATIONAL PREDICAMENTS**
- Invisible burdens: invisible toxic exposure, invisible encroachment on non-work life
- Invisible contributions: invisible administrative or technical support work, invisible emotional or personal support work, invisible proposals or objections

**FURTHER MODERATORS**
- Diligent beliefs: the call of duty, belief in hard work
- Proximal Appreciation and support: appreciation from stakeholders, informal support networks, community of practice spirit

**Consequences**
- Distress
where legacies of colonial (Chiu and Levin 1999) and pro-Beijing post-handover governments (Chan et al. 2002; Sing 2004) include minimal regulation of the labour market and industrial relations, and consequent managerial supremacy (Au and Bemmels 2000; Chan et al. 2002; Ngo et al. 2002). There is no unemployment benefit; employees also lack protection against unfair dismissal and low wages, and tend to embrace individual rather than collective bargaining (Ng 2001). At the time of the research, economic recession, downsizing, delaying and plentiful labour supply had further intensified the ‘whip’ of the market. We anticipate that fear of the ‘flick of the finger, tap on the shoulder’ (Anonymous 1996), would predispose employees to live with representational predicaments rather than challenge them.

Despite modern legal institutions, Hong Kong, like other Chinese societies, remains influenced by neo-Confucian values, such as inequality (Lau 1979; Leys 1997: xvi; Tu 1998), and asymmetrical rights (Wu 2002). Hong Kong rates high both on masculinity and power distance (Hofstede 1980, 1991; Wong and Birnbaum-Moore 1994), and is a network based society (Redding 1990). High masculinity societies tend to undervalue quality of life, focus on the trappings of success, and emphasize aggressive instrumentality rather than care. High power distance entails non-egalitarian expectations that junior level members have relatively few rights in organizational life, and should not expect to voice their concerns. The networked nature of Chinese societies challenges junior members, otherwise assumed to be untrustworthy (Lee 1996), to break into inner circles by building guanxi or relational proximity, either directly with insiders or indirectly through networks to insiders. According to Figure 2, these values and normative structures are unlikely to foster high fidelity meritocracy, the lack of which is likely to lead to representational predicaments for outsiders, whose contributions may be discounted and whose sacrifices and burdens may be overlooked.

We now explain our research methodology. We then discuss the rest of the model as we analyze each case site in turn. We end with a conclusion and a discussion of limitations.

THE RESEARCH

We adopted qualitative case study methodology (Miles and Huberman 1994), using a relatively conservative title, ‘Interpersonal Skills at Work’ to recruit host organizations because of the potential sensitivity of the subject matter (Brannen 1988), especially in Chinese societies, where people tend not to open up to strangers (Shenkar 1994). Through
networking (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Hornby and Symon 1994: 169-170), we obtained collaboration from gatekeepers at three sites, called here Agency A, Company L, and Organization U. Agency A was an insurance retail branch attached to a multinational financial services company. Company L was a small on-line database service provider, recently acquired by a larger company but remaining under the day to day control of its former owner-manager, a male Hong Kong Chinese. Organization U was a publicly funded provider of tertiary education. Because of the relatively small number of interviewees and case organizations, the emergent model (Figure 2) is provisional, and subject to further testing against further cases in different contexts (Allison 1993; King 1995; May 1993; O’Sullivan et al. 1995).

Data Collection and Analysis

Between November 2002 and August 2003, a Senior Research Assistant interviewed 24 staff at the three sites: 13 at Agency A, 6 at Company L, and 5 from the administrative side at Organization U. In each organization, the sample was relatively balanced gender-wise, and represented a range of seniority levels. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, were structured by an interview guide probing 4 or 5 potentially difficult critical incidents. Each interviewee was given an assurance of confidentiality, but was informed that the aggregate data would be made available to each interviewee. Descriptive narration (Miles and Huberman 1994) was encouraged. Interviewees indicated how often each type of incident occurred, and rated the amount of recognition they had received for dealing with each. Data were also collected about the seniority structure and various human resource management systems. Interviews were transcribed into English and analysis proceeded, during a series of half-day meetings between the authors and the interviewer, in tandem with further data collection. Themes were allowed to emerge from the data, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), and helped to shape the course of the later interviews, enabling deeper issues to be explored, while interviewing multiple individuals in each case organization allowed data to be cross-checked (King 1995). At a later stage in the analysis, data were categorized into recognizable clusters involving abstraction until the clusters were saturated (Glaser 1978) and formed analytical generalizations that could explain more general phenomena experienced by others (Husserl 1973; Yin 1989). We now illustrate Figure 2 with an analysis of each case, in turn.
AGENCY A

Background

Agency A was one of 22 locally-based insurance agency branches attached to Company A, a financial services company headquartered in Hong Kong. Company A was itself a subsidiary of a multinational corporation headquartered in the West, but its operations were largely independent of its parent corporation. In 2003, Company A, including its attached Hong Kong agencies, had a total of 2,100 staff, while Agency A had 76 insurance staff: a director, 9 other managerial grade staff, and 66 sales grade staff. Various intermediate job titles represented further status distinctions at Agency A, as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Basic official responsibilities</th>
<th>Job titles</th>
<th>N*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>Sales, recruitment, agency policy, management development</td>
<td>Agency director</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales, recruitment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior branch manager</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Branch manager</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior sales manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sales manager</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant sales manager</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales staff</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Senior business manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Business manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant business manager</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior agent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No. of people interviewed in the research study

Embedded Human Resource Values

According to Figure 2, human resource values embedded within an organization are shaped by the extra-organizational human resource governance environment, unless the latter is moderated by best practice open governance benchmarking and/or by internal dominant
authorities' non-conformist values. There were no signs of these moderators at Company A, where embedded values appeared to reflect the Hong Kong environment.

Company A's headquarters (Hong Kong HQ) had imposed a performance management system on the local agencies. Several features of this system, described next, suggested that the embedded values were aggressively instrumental (Bailyn and Fletcher 2004; ten Bos 1997). No one at Agency A received a base salary; their incomes and continued employment were determined by canonical statistical formulae and quotas set by Hong Kong HQ. Mr. T, agency director at Agency A, said that Hong Kong HQ's exclusive attention to the canonical indicators rendered staff appraisal largely redundant, although he still undertook it. Managerial grade staff at Agency A, who bore the title of assistant sales manager or above, earned most of their income from a mixture of direct commissions from sales to their own clients, and overriding commissions sliced from sales made by subordinate agents. Sales grade staff at Agency A, who bore the title of senior business manager or below, had their sales volume and policy renewal rates individually assessed. Those missing their monthly quota received a warning letter; those missing it for two consecutive months had their contract 'auto-terminated'; while those missing the quarterly quota lost their medical benefits. Symbols of sales success or failure were highly visible, and served to intensify the whip of the market. At a high-profile annual meeting, Hong Kong HQ assigned one of four grades to each of the 22 agencies, and the worst performers in terms of sales, productivity and manpower growth were dubbed 'hurry up agencies'. Canonical statistics on annual performance determined job titles. Ms. U, a senior agent, said that she had moved up and down the title hierarchy many times during her 13 years with the company, adding that some colleagues had left the company because of loss of face entailed by status relegation. Some who remained were shadows of their former selves. Mr. T explained:

'Many employees have been working for the company for more than 10 years. They chose to remain as sales staff rather than becoming managerial staff. They once reached a pinnacle position, such as business manager. But as they get older, they are less productive. Some of them are in their 60s. They used to rent their own booths, but now they can only afford to rent a desk in the open-plan office. There was no space for their old trophies, which were just left aside. Their glory became past history'.
Managerial grade staff faced similar pressures, as their job titles varied according to team size and annual team sales productivity. Mr. I, a sales manager, lamented, 'People talk only of current sales figures, regardless of how brilliant your past performance was.' Whiteboards and posters reminded staff about their own sales figures and were displayed prominently all around the office walls. Furthermore, Company A appeared to pay little attention to unethical competition between staff members. For example, Ms. N, an agent, complained that a manager in another team, Ms. B, 'stole' a customer from her:

"Ms. B behaved as if nothing had happened... I was very angry and couldn't sleep for two nights. I went to her office and asked her why she had done this, and she told me that it was about the survival-of-the-fittest 'rule', implying that she had the right to do what she had done. The company didn't care who closed the deal."

In addition, the reward system for line managers militated against their involvement in coaching and staff development, as they could earn more from their own sales activity than from overriding commissions. Mr. T explained:

'There is a direct conflict between agents and their immediate supervisor, the sales manager, in terms of the time allocation between coaching and helping the agents and the sales manager's own direct sales. To do a line manager's job properly, you need to spend a lot of time nurturing your agent so that he or she develops. Then, you nurture another one, then another, until your team is developed. You need to spend a lot of effort doing this but your income from it isn't proportional to your effort. Therefore a sales manager tends to focus on his or her own personal sales, and spends less time on training and nurturing his or her agents'.

Embedded values at Company A regarding decision making and communication entailed top-down, small-circle governance, and required subordinates to defer to authority, also reflecting the external Hong Kong environment. There were strong barriers to upward communication within Agency A, and between Agency A and Hong Kong HQ. For example, managerial grade staff were allowed to contact senior staff at Hong Kong HQ, whereas sales grade staff members were not. Ms. I, a sales manager, explained the importance of status:
'The more you go to Hong Kong HQ, the more you interact with colleagues there... whereas the sales grade staff just deal with the small potatoes and the replies make them very angry. Mr. T brings me there and introduces me to the senior people. In the insurance industry, you need a record of production and a title to increase your status.'

Junior sales grade staff found lack of status a problem when clients expected them, on their behalf, to contest unfavorable rulings from Hong Kong HQ. As Ms. N explained:

'We used to hope that our line manager would reflect the issues to senior management, but she usually takes the company’s position and rebuts our opinions, without listening to us. Whether our opinions are correct or not, she should listen to our opinions before counter-arguing. But she doesn’t. We all feel that it’s useless to voice our opinions'.

Mr. T explained that the line managers had reached their positions on the strength of sales performance rather than managerial ability. Mr. L, an agent, agreed, adding:

'The current system offers no direct communication channel for agents to feed their ideas back to the company. There are times when agents think of ways to improve certain services or products, but there is no suggestion box or telephone number that we can use to express our ideas. Even our line managers do not provide channels. The agency meeting serves instead as a forum for them to announce company policies and information. Whenever you, as an agent, voice out your opinions, they will tell you to get your sales result. It is top-down communication only... The culture here is that agents do not express their ideas'.

**Representational Climate and Representational Predicaments**

Figure 2 posits that if embedded human resource values are aggressively instrumental, and are oriented toward deference and top-down, small-circle governance, then representational climates tend not to be characterized by high-fidelity meritocracy, and expose employees to a high risk of representational predicaments. Interviewees indicated that PIEs for sales grade staff and for most managers at Agency A were exclusively determined by the canonical performance indicators. While some welcomed this on the grounds the indicators were ‘objective’, and offered freedom from games of impression management,
many felt that the indicators were incomplete, implying a pseudo-meritocratic representational climate.

Most Agency A employees reported representational predicaments, which entailed two types of phenomena that were invisible to Hong Kong HQ. The first type comprised invisible contributions (Fletcher 1995, 1998) of various kinds, including emotional labour (Spector and Fox 2002) and personal support work associated with after-sales service, and administrative and technical work undertaken to support the running of the agency (see Zabusky and Barley 1996). The second type comprised invisible burdens, including toxic exposure (Frost 2002) to external customers, and encroachment on non-work life (Knights and McCabe 2003).

**Invisible Contributions**

Most interviewees, whether male or female, reported providing invisible after-sales service that was situationally extorted and driven by contextual rationality (Townley 2002) in that they felt that clients and the company took it for granted. A typical case for Mr. Y, an assistant business manager, involved handling a complaint from a male client, whose injury compensation claim had been rejected by Hong Kong HQ. The angry client needed to be pacified, and then demanded assistance in drafting a complaint letter. After Hong Kong HQ reiterated its verdict, Mr. Y felt obliged to give detailed explanations. A typical case for Mr. L involved a rejected reimbursement claim from an ‘orphan’ client, i.e., one whose original agent had left the company, whose monthly contribution via auto-payment came off unexpectedly early one month, leading to an overdraft and an interest charge. Mr. L explained the technicalities, advised the client to choose a different auto-payment period, arranged for Hong Kong HQ to issue an explanatory letter, telephoned the client after the letter was sent out, and then met her again to answer further questions about the matter.

Mr. T. assigned each line manager additional responsibility for particular support functions, such as training and sales development, and sales grade staff provided voluntary help to these managers. For example, Mr. I was IT manager, and Mr. L assisted him; Mr. I organized the installation of CCTV security cameras, while Mr. L undertook background research on the adoption of wireless internet technology. Other staff organized social events for agency staff. Sales grade staff appreciated such work but it was invisible to Hong Kong HQ. Ms. M, a business manager, commented:
'Some agents here may not achieve good sales results, but they are very good at organizing activities, which can help improve co-operation and create better relationships among employees... Everyone has his/her particular strengths but the interpersonal skills involved in organizing extra-work activities are not recognized because the management does not have time to understand that they are important'.

Invisible Burdens

Such invisible work sometimes entailed concomitant invisible toxic exposure. Two examples concerning claims on health insurance policies show that the toxicity could be strong. Ms. M had handled a case long-running case involving a cancer patient, where Company A would not pay out until the disease had reached a critical stage. When that point came, the client, who had moved overseas, called her:

"She was extremely agitated and angry. She just wanted to get the compensation money as soon as possible to pay the medical bills because she was afraid she would die within the week and the money would be stuck in Hong Kong... I calmed myself down to listen to her... I tried to understand the client’s position, and felt her unhappiness. I listened to her grievances first, and then explained the procedures to her. I told her that I would try my best to get the money from the company. I went beyond the call of duty, by researching how she could get the money transferred to Canada... I got zero recognition from the company for any of this. This is an insurance company and all these efforts are ‘no production’. Management won’t understand your efforts.”

Ms. I handled a complaint from an aggrieved orphan client, who blamed Agency A for letting his policy lapse before he underwent a kidney operation. Ms. I, who said that reminder letters had been sent, but had failed to reach him, met him several times:

‘He voiced his dissatisfaction for several hours, repeating the same story again and again... On another occasion, after his claim was turned down due to a legal clause, he lost his temper, complained violently, and scolded me for a long time. I let him yell at me, and then I told him how I could fight the management for him and obtain his benefits... In the end, I succeeded in helping him and he continued his policy’.
Ms. I's first meeting with the client lasted from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. and entailed invisible encroachment on non-work life for her. Several other interviewees mentioned an internal source of such encroachment, a ruling by Agency A's management team that agents must report for duty by 9:15 a.m., Monday to Saturday, or incur a $HK10 fine, increasing to $HK50 by 9.45. Mr. I said that he lobbied Mr. T to abandon or dilute the policy, to no avail.

**Distress**

Figure 2 posits that representational predicaments are a source of distress. Invoking the ethics of care (Gilligan 1982), Ms. M spoke for other Agency A interviewees, about their frustration with the low-fidelity PIEs of the agency’s work:

'Better customer service would lead to decreased complaints and policy withdrawals. We should understand the clients better and care for them. But my boss wants efficiency and effectiveness, that is, quick sales closure... She wants me to change but I can’t because I can’t go against my conscience. Many times I tried to follow her instructions but it was too hard on me... Now I avoid direct confrontation with her because I don’t want to be unhappy'.

Several reports indicated that invisible encroachment on family life arising from the 9.15 a.m. attendance rule had caused considerable distress for some married women. Comparing her plight to that of a gay singer, famous in Hong Kong, who died tragically, Ms. U declared:

'I chose to work in this industry because of the flexibility of the working hours..., which shouldn’t be fixed... I understand why Leslie Cheung killed himself. I know how he felt and his situation'.

Ms. P, an assistant business manager, wept during the interview, claiming that because of the attendance rule she had lost all interest in her work, and describing how her family life had been disrupted. She said:

'I cried for half an hour telling Mr. T about my family problems. But a man usually doesn’t take care of the children so much as a woman, so he didn’t empathize with my
difficulties as a woman would. He asked me why my husband and I could not force our child to go to bed earlier.

**Moderating Factors**

Yet most staff at Agency A did not indicate distress. Figure 2 proposes several moderating factors, two pairs of which appeared to come into play at Agency A. One pair, relational proximity to dominant authorities, and compatibility with embedded values, appeared, for a minority of interviewees at Agency A, to moderate the impact of aggressive instrumentality and top down decision making on the experience of representational predicaments. A second pair, i.e., proximal appreciation and support and diligent beliefs appeared, for many, to moderate the impact of representational predicaments on distress.

**Relational Proximity to Dominant Authorities**

Besides Mr. T, the most senior interviewee was Ms. T, a senior sales manager. Neither of them reported representational predicaments of their own, and one reason appeared to be that they had sufficient status to develop relationships with dominant authorities at Hong Kong HQ. Ms. T described how she leveraged these when pursuing a customer complaint:

'I called the manager of policy administration. He told me what procedures I should follow and appreciated that. I had contacted him many times before and we had a good relationship based on his professional and impartial judgment of previous cases'.

This enabled Ms. T to compile a dossier of evidence in support of the client's claim:

'The manager of policy administration contacted me a month later and asked me a lot of further questions about the customer and the incident. He had discussed the case with the senior manager of the claims department and they trusted my report. Both managers trusted my credibility, based on my track record'.

Ms. T had built a reputation with Hong Kong HQ on the basis of something other than the canonical measures, such that PIEs took account of her after-sales support work and her professionalism.
‘They revived the client’s policy... on condition that he paid back his missing premium... I believe that our company is a really customer-oriented company. This is the third time I have experienced something like this here. I am proud of this company’.

*Compatibility with Embedded Values*

Ms. T was also an unusually aggressive advocate of company values. She declared:

‘I think the agents here got spoiled. I think the staff should think about how they can improve. They should consider what they can give to the company, instead of asking for rewards all the time... Of course, the first thing that attracted me to join the industry was the money...’

It appeared, by contrast, that most other interviewees, while accepting the principle of performance related pay, felt that the embedded values were excessively instrumental, and detracted from non-material imperatives such as family life and staff loyalty. Ms. U appeared to reflect the feelings of many colleagues when she said:

‘The key success factors in this field are that you have to have a strong sense of your goal and that you pursue it: title, power, money. But I’m not a career woman. I don’t pursue certain sales revenues and I don’t plan any strategies to achieve the goals... If we sit down together with our line manager [a branch manager] for a meal without talking about company business, there is certainly a deep bond of emotion between her and us. But if we deal with business, I don’t find that she has given any appreciation or respect to us, who have worked for such a long time’.

*Proximal Appreciation and Support*

Proximal appreciation and support appeared to moderate the distress arising from representational predicaments. Client (or beneficiary) appreciation was important to Mr. I:

‘Personally, all the recognition comes from customers, not from the company... For example, you bring a cheque to a widow whose husband has just died, and she bursts into tears to thank you. Although you feel sad, this also makes you feel appreciated... This is a worthwhile, meaningful job because you can help those who are in need’.
There were several illustrations of community sustenance (Wenger et al. 2002), or what Ms. U characterized as Agency A’s ‘strong human touch’. For example, Mr. R, senior business manager, mentioned the solace that colleagues provided:

‘You are bound to have troughs. Sharing your experience and learning from others can enlighten you... but sharing your troughs with colleagues helps you also... I believe that if you can have a good relationship with your colleagues, your relationship with customers will also be good. You can’t survive alone.’

Mr. Y said that he gave technical and analytical support for some members of other teams, who were in their 50s and facing obsolescence, in exchange for a share of their commissions. This underground economy helped them to meet quotas and remain on the books, and did not constitute a representational predicament for Mr. Y, since he derived income and long term prospects from it and was confident of meeting his own sales quota:

‘They just talk to the clients and I do all the rest, setting up the appointments, doing the financial planning calculations and preparing the recommendations. That way, the closing ratio is higher. We share their commission. When they eventually retire, I will be able to follow up with their clients. It’s win-win’.

Despite the blind-spot identified by Ms. P, other interviewees described Mr. T as supportive, caring, encouraging, and helpful. Mr. S, sales manager, said that at a time of personal crisis, Mr. T listened sympathetically and temporarily reassigned his agency support tasks: ‘He made me feel secure, and helped me to avoid feeling guilty’. Mr. L said that Mr. T often praised the IT team’s contributions at agency meetings.

Mr. T appeared to have cultivated a generally supportive atmosphere. For example, he coached line managers to adopt an encouraging rather than ‘scolding’ approach, and in an act of benevolent autocracy (Tayeb 1998) he required all 9 sales managers to form a training team, and persuaded 3 high-performing sales staff to join. Mr. G, an assistant business manager, confirmed that there were regular training sessions, adding:

‘The experienced people here are really willing to help us and share their experiences... Colleagues here are like brothers and sisters helping each other out’.
Diligent Beliefs

Diligent beliefs also helped interviewees to cope with representational predicaments. Mr. L said: 'It's our duty to solve the customer's problem. I think every colleague will tell you this.' Others said that hard work paid off in the long term. Ms N reflected both beliefs:

'You get what you plant seeds for. If you work hard, your return is substantial. But more importantly, you can help people. My first client had an accident in the first year of the policy, and you feel that the job can help people.'

COMPANY L

Background

Co. L was a web-based search engine company established in 1999 by the owner-CEO, Mr. A. After Co. L was sold to a listed holding company in April 2000, Mr. A kept an ownership stake and remained CEO, with responsibility for day to day control. Co. L had 26 employees – 6 managerial and 20 lower level staff – in 2003.

Embedded Human Resource Values

Interviewees' accounts suggested that Mr. A's approach to management fitted the simple structure and 'headship' patterns traditionally adopted in small Chinese businesses, reflecting cultural values of large power distance, and a networked and low transparency orientation rather than open governance orientation (Redding 1990; Westwood 1997). Three other founder-members remained at Co. L: Mr. D, account manager; Mr. H, senior web designer; and Mr. O, senior account manager. Mr. H implied that, early on, all had close helper guanxi relationships (Fan 2002) with Mr. A, but that these became strained later:

'The CEO always asks me to do something and I can’t say no or raise any objections. I just follow his ideas... You don’t argue with the CEO. I remember there were a few times when he said the three of us didn’t support him. He expects us to support him'.

Another source of tension between Mr. A and the others, and a sign of lack of transparency, was that some months before the interviews, without prior announcement or subsequent explanation, there had been a 10-day delay in salary payments. Mr. H claimed
that Mr. A had imposed several decisions against others’ advice, that these decisions had failed, and that Mr. A had subsequently played this down. He added that employees had learned to defer to Mr. A because it was futile to argue with him:

‘He is very long-winded. We had cases in the past where we argued with him for 4 to 5 hours and it was a waste of time’.

Ms. C, the administration and finance manager, was in her second period with the company. She described herself as a bridge and mediator between Mr. A and other staff, softening his ‘imperative orders’. This arrangement posed a problem for Ms. L, an administrative clerk:

‘I think that if the CEO gets more involved with other colleagues in the company, the atmosphere will become better. Now, he just talks to a few direct reports and is distant from everyone else.’

At the request of the holding company, Mr. A, with help from Ms. C, had developed systems to represent employee performance. Many interviewees focused on the shortcomings of the system for determining bonus payments, which, they said, had been imposed unilaterally, was rudimentary, lacked transparency, had had been implemented retrospectively, and had been unduly weighted toward sick leave and lateness records. Mr. W, IT engineer, said, ‘staff are not happy about this system but dare not express their dissatisfaction’. Emphasis on hours in the office may be seen as a manifestation of aggressive instrumentality and masculine cultural values (Hofstede 1980, 1991). While this reflects global trends (Harpaz and Snir 2003; Landers et al. 1996; Osterman 1996), a survey of global employment practices ranked Hong Kong number one in terms of hours worked per week and last in terms of holidays taken annually (UBS 2003: 21).

**Representational Climate and Representational Predicaments**

Figure 2 posits that if embedded human resource values are aggressively instrumental, and if they assume top-down governance and employee deference, representational climates tend not to be characterized by high-fidelity meritocracy, and expose employees to a high risk of representational predicaments. This appeared to be the case at Company L, where interviewees believed that PIEs were unrepresentative in two main respects. First, as noted
above, they felt that the selection of work life space domains featuring in PIEs, as symbolized by the way bonus payments were determined, was arbitrary and incomplete, over-emphasizing punctuality and attendance. Second, they felt that the methods of measurement were subject to distortion. For example, Mr. W, complained:

'The company only looks at the sign-in time, and not at the sign-out time. As long as you are punctual, you are considered okay... and you can get by easily because the management doesn't have time to monitor your performance'.

Face to face appraisal was another means of measurement. Mr. A appraised most of the managerial staff, and frontline staff underwent performance appraisal by their respective line managers. Mr. O said of his appraisal by Mr. A, 'It is based on the CEO’s observation and is seen through his eyes. It is his personal view without an objective basis'. Mr. W, who was appraised by his department head, complained again:

'I feel that those in middle management hide the real situation from the CEO, and take all the credit when things go well, leaving the lower level staff to take the blame when problems arise... Most staff members feel they have no prospects in this company'.

The representational climate thus appeared to be characterized by arbitrary fiat, and as with Agency A, most Company L interviewees reported representational predicaments.

Invisible Contributions

As at Agency A, it appeared that many non sales-related work contributions were invisible. For example, Ms. L, who assumed responsibility for office discipline, described an occasion when she had to handle disruptive behaviour. Mr. A and other managers were out and Mr. O, the most senior member left in the office, was gambling noisily with his subordinates. Ms. L saw that they were disturbing others and tried to attract Mr. O's attention by asking him to attend to some administrative matters, but he ignored her. Eventually, after consulting Ms. C, she persuaded Mr. D to quieten them down. Mr. O scowled at Ms. L, but smiled at her again the following day. Both the tact exercised by Ms. L and Mr. D, and the toxic exposure suffered by the non-sales staff, remained invisible to Mr. A.
Ms. C, describing a case where she mediated between Mr. A and a department head about a proposal for headcount reduction and office relocation, said that she found this role double-edged. On the one hand, it brought her closer to Mr. A, but on the other, she said, ‘Nobody knows about my invisible effort but I take it on as part of my daily duties.’

Mr. W related two episodes of invisible technical support work carried out by the IT support team, both stemming from a decision by Mr. A to reject their request to purchase a firewall. The team persuaded Mr. A to fund a cheap alternative, which they hoped to adapt as a quasi-firewall. In order not to disrupt daily operations, the team worked overnight to install the alternative software:

“We worked on the installation till 3.00 a.m. but it failed. It was a potential disaster because the server and all websites went down. Then we needed to restore everything back to normal before 8.00 a.m. Otherwise, there would have a crisis. We worked very hard and were able to restore the system in time.”

Mr. A gave them the morning off, but Mr. W said they felt resentful because ‘Nobody praised or recognized our efforts’. The failed experiment left the system open to virus attack, and some time later, after the inevitable happened, the team spent another 6-7 hours restoring the system. Mr. W said that Mr. A once again gave them insufficient recognition.

_Invisible burdens_

Company L interviewees reported several cases of invisible toxic exposure. One example was Ms. L’s encounter with Mr. O, reported above. Ms. L said that on another occasion, she endured ‘bad face’ and ‘foul language’ from the former administration manager as the latter packed her belongings under Ms. L’s supervision after Mr. A had dismissed her for fraud. Ms. C said that in her mediating role between Mr. A and others, she had to absorb resentment about Mr. A’s directives, proposals and stances. For example, Mr. D complained to her that Mr. A had broken a promise about a higher rate of commission. Ms. C said:

‘His harsh words made me feel uncomfortable. I felt I took all the blame... In this position, you have to endure a lot but you can’t disclose the bad words that people say about each other. Personally, I was unhappy that night’.
Mr. O reported invisible toxic exposure from external customers, after a price hike. Sometimes, when customers complained to sales staff that the web-site had gone down, sales staff pressurized the IT support team. Mr. W described one such occasion:

'The sales team kept calling us because they were receiving many complaint calls from their customers. Under stress, everyone started pointing fingers at each other. While we didn’t shout at each other, we did not react calmly'.

**Distress**

As noted above, Ms. C was unhappy in her mediating role. Some of the IT team’s distress appeared to stem from the invisibility of their work. Mr. W, who claimed that ‘low morale pervades the whole company’, described their feelings of ineffectuality when the web site went down because of a virus attack:

'We knew it was not our fault, and... we started to grumble. But we also felt we were not good enough or smart enough to solve the problems. Had the company allocated more resources to protect the system, such as allowing us install a firewall, we would not have felt so helpless and we would not have had to toil so hard'.

**Moderating Factors**

The same moderating factors identified at Agency A came into play at Company L. Interviews suggested that representational predicaments were spread unevenly among the staff; and that, in accordance with Figure 2, employees’ relational proximity with Mr. A, and their compatibility with embedded values served to reduce their intensity and incidence. Proximal appreciation and support and diligent beliefs appeared, for some staff, to moderate the distress that might have otherwise stemmed from representational predicaments.

**Relational Proximity to Dominant Authority and Compatibility with Embedded Values**

For Ms C, relational proximity to the dominant authority appeared to moderate some of the invisibility of her mediator role, for she enjoyed privileged access to Mr. A and said, ‘As time goes by, from his behavior, I feel I have established my credibility with him’. Mr. D appeared to have found his niche. He reported obtaining a high-profile corporate contract, and was said to have received prizes for his earlier sales performances. Mr. O, while not as
close to Mr. A as he once was, appeared to know what Mr. A valued, and was content to use impression management techniques to reduce the likelihood of representational predicaments:

‘It is better to get to work earlier than Mr. A, leave the office later than him, and let him know it. Second, when you perform a duty, exaggerate the difficulties of the task. For example, you tell Mr. A that you need more time to finish the duty than actually needed, and then complete the task before the deadline. This will impress him as a surprise and you will receive recognition for it.’

_Diligent Beliefs and Proximal Appreciation and Support_

Mr. W’s account of how he and his colleagues in the IT support team worked together during the virus attack exemplifies diligent beliefs and proximal appreciation and support:

‘After our initial angst, we worked together to solve the problem. Some called friends, some looked up books, and some posted our problem onto a newsgroup. Eventually... we downloaded the software to fix the system. In the end we showed that we are effective staff. We try to solve problems for the company as we don’t have any conflicts of interest in the IT department.’

**ORGANIZATION U**

_Background_

Organization U was a Hong Kong based tertiary education institution, employing around 500 staff. We investigated the administrative side of Organization U, which comprised 300 non-academic office workers, whose work ranged from clerical and secretarial duties to financial management and other specialist professional and managerial tasks. While most senior level posts at Organization U were held by academics, 8% of the administrative staff members were also classified as senior level staff.

_EMBEDDED HUMAN RESOURCE VALUES_

By comparison with Company A and Company L, embedded values at Organization U appeared to be oriented more toward empowerment rather than deference and silence, toward institutionalized respect for staff and collegiality rather than aggressive
instrumentality; and toward openness to upward ideas rather than small-circle, exclusively top-down governance.

Two interviewees, Mr. H and Ms. K, both middle ranking administrators, described close, supportive and to some extent empowering relationships with their substantially higher-ranking immediate line managers, both of whom belonged to the senior management team. Mr. H, a specialist in construction work, reported how he and his line manager arrived at an agreement about a building project:

‘As an administrator and accountant, he wanted to maximize the space usage. He didn’t want so many corridors, whereas we from the industry knew that you needed corridors to connect the rooms. He wanted a square room, not a rectangular room; whereas we knew that the teachers wanted a rectangular room. After the first meeting... we said that we would think about each other’s opinions. At the second meeting... I presented some amended designs to him, though not fulfilling all his wants... At the third meeting... we ended up with a compromised design... He was willing to listen and understand my reasons.’

Mr. H said that he noticed that a consultant architect on another project was neglecting his duties. He reported this to his line manager and to an associated committee, who empowered him to tackle the problem. When it transpired that ‘the architect didn’t like the structural engineers altering his design’, Mr. H drew on best practice to get the project back on track:

“There is a technique called ‘arrangement’. It assembles all critical steps in a clear, systematic and smooth route so that all parties can... solve problems easily.”

Ms. K, a senior administrative officer, reported being supported and empowered by her line manager, a chair professor:

“My boss and I work as a close team. I feel that he gives me recognition every day. I ask him if he has read my emails about how I handled the sensitive cases, and he always says, ‘Fine. No problem’.”
Ms. K said that her line manager did not stand in her way when she decided, after some agonizing, to renew the contract of an erratic junior clerk whom she judged performed excellently on some aspects of the job while also having made several significant errors:

“His first reaction... was, ‘You still renew it given that you say that her performance is like this. Your choice. You’re not as tough as you think you are. Don’t come to me to complain later’. He let me make my decision... I have to bear all consequences.”

That Ms. K’s line manager did not intercede suggests that Organization U’s embedded values were not aggressively instrumental. Ms. L, senior administrative officer, said:

“It’s difficult to get rid of a staff member with poor performance. The system is ‘by exception’. You have to write reports if you want to fire an employee.”

Organization U nonetheless required a certain standard of performance. Ms. L described the case of a clerical officer in her section:

‘Due to her poor performance, she needs to keep a time log of her work... We have to be careful when dealing with her. Each officer has the responsibility to tell her clearly about any mistakes and we have to write reports... Other colleagues still have a lot of complaints about her... She hasn’t shown much improvement...Therefore, she probably cannot survive in the department... She might be removed’.

Another sign that instrumentality was muted was that a grievance procedure enabled staff members to lodge complaints to the human resource department, which would then form an ad-hoc committee, empowered to mediate or recommend remedial action. Ms. R, director of human resources, gave an example:

‘A supervisor spoke harshly to a staff member, and the supervisor’s boss stepped in... and coached the supervisor.... The case went to the committee, where...we advocate a more considerate approach... The supervisor was told to pay attention to his words. Even if subordinates have unsatisfactory performance, there’s no excuse for treating them badly.’
Collegiality was a formal criterion in contract renewal, and interviewees said it was important in determining the ten annual administrative excellence award winners. Ms. R said:

'We emphasize collegiality. We don’t expect staff to quarrel or to point fingers at each other... Collegiality is what we always preach. Through training workshops and orientation, we communicate the importance of customer service to the employees. One is encouraged to step outside one’s job responsibilities to help colleagues or the institution... It is expected that colleagues help each other out...'

In practice, collegiality sometimes fell short of expectations. Ms. K. complained:

"I feel colleagues sometimes can’t develop teamwork... For example, they will say, ‘they are your students, so you handle them.’...I think it may not be colleagues’ fault because everyone is so busy doing their jobs. But there is still a lack of spontaneous inter-departmental cooperation, and unless you know a person well, you have to do favours for him/her first."

Ms. R also claimed, "‘shoe-shining’ is definitely not a dominant culture here”. In practice, when suggesting actions or policies to line superiors or to senior academics, administrative staff appeared to take a middle way between shoe-shining and asserting rights. Ms. L’s tactics as a secretary to a committee comprising four male chair professors illustrated Organization U’s relative openness to upward ideas, if tactfully introduced:

‘I ... alerted the members about an issue by email, and asked them for their opinion. Nobody had any opinions....During the meeting, I let all members with their brilliant minds come up with their ideas first. Nobody had any, so I threw in my idea. Their response was that my idea was very fair and good. At the end, my suggestion was accepted... I gave them time to think of solutions to avoid giving them the impression that the secretary was very dominant. I had to make them feel they were being respected. A boss is always a boss.’

**Representational Climate**

It appeared from the interviews that besides the grievance procedure mentioned above, three other structural arrangements encouraged reasonably full, fair and accurate assessment
of work demands and contributions at Organization U, leading to reasonably high high-fidelity PIEs, and thus reducing the risk of representational predicaments. First, a University-level committee, comprising senior administrative staff from various administrative departments, considered appraisal reports completed by subordinates and line managers. Ms. R stated:

‘This is not exactly like peer review or 360 degree appraisal, but there is some check and balance, because people know about each other’s sections, and if there are discrepancies between the committee members’ and the supervisor’s opinions, the supervisor or staff will be requested to provide documentary evidence.’

Second, decisions of this staff review body were subject to appeal, and the appeals committee, comprising non-University staff had, over the years, demonstrated independence by overturning several decisions about contract renewals. Third, there had been an independent job evaluation of administrative jobs.

Relative Deprivation Versus Representational Predicaments

The distinction between relative deprivation and representational predicaments emerged as a conceptual issue in the analysis of Organization U, where both Ms. K and Ms. L expressed relative deprivation that was traceable to two policies: salary freezes for serving staff and less favorable terms and conditions of employment for new recruits. Both policies had been implemented lock-step across the Hong Kong higher education system in the wake of economic deflation and budget cuts. Ms. K complained about conditions for newcomers:

‘As newcomers, we are all on contract, and we must perform well in order to get our contracts renewed, but longer-serving staff, even if they are still on contract, basically will have their contracts continued regardless’.

Organization U had also frozen promotions for administrators. Mr. H and Ms. L said that they performed the work of higher-graded posts, without promotion and the corresponding pay increase that would have accompanied it.
Interviewees nonetheless reported few representational predicaments. They tended to feel that their contributions were visible to dominant authorities, and that these were appreciated. For example, Mr. S, an officer, stated:

‘The recognition here is enough... The bosses here (such as the associate director) and the teachers...have seen my development and career progression.’

Ms. L said:

‘The senior managers say that... they can ask me anything because I’m like a bible. This certainly makes me very happy.... They have assigned me to help [with a new assignment]. This shows that they trust me. I feel that this type of recognition is important. Since there are no job promotions or pay rises, the recognition nowadays is when the bosses trust you or think you can help them... The registrar tells me that I have been praised by the president’.

Several interviews reported encroachment on non-work life that went uncompensated in material terms, but they all felt also that such sacrifices were recognized by dominant authorities. For example, Ms. K felt appreciated by her line manager, a member of the senior management team:

‘Colleagues and I seldom talk to each other because we are very busy. We just bury our heads working till very late and we become very tired. The next day, we come back with our fatigued bodies and continue to work... Yet I feel that my office is the happiest place because we have a very understanding boss. Even when he can’t do anything tangible to help us, he still will come in to peg our shoulders back and tell us not to work so late. When I tell him about my unfinished work, he acknowledges it and still tells me not to work so late.’

Cases of toxic exposure appeared to be rare, and dominant authorities were aware of them. For example, on one occasion, Ms. K felt that an academic staff member whose consent and discretion were needed to solve a student problem was ‘very impolite and didn’t give us face’, and scolded her for challenging her academic status:
‘My boss knows the whole case. He supports me saying that he knows it. He can’t take on the case, because it will just aggravate the situation because the academic may complain that he is using high-pressure authority to force them. His spiritual support behind me is already sufficient from me. This is what keeps me going.’

Distress

In general, interviewees expressed a sense of commitment and belonging to Organization U and there were few signs of distress.

Factors Moderating the Impact of the Extra-Organizational Antecedents

Unlike at Agency A and Company L, two moderating factors that apparently came into play to reduce the likelihood of representational predicaments at Organization U were best practice open governance benchmarking, and the non-conformist values of dominant authorities. As indicated in Figure 2, these may have moderated the impact of the extra-organizational antecedents on embedded human resource values.

Best Practice Open Governance Benchmarking

Since Organization U was a quasi-government organization, it had institutionalized structures and procedures modeled in part on the Hong Kong government, an organization which, while adopting a laissez-faire approach regarding employment regulation, has traditionally cast itself as a role model of a good employer (Chan et al. 2002; Chiu and Levin 1999). In addition, Organization U had benchmarked its governance system against those of other tertiary educational institutes worldwide, in order to obtain its charter. Thus a committee system served as a check and balance against potential arbitrary top-down authority, and against unfair performance assessments.

Non-Conformist Values of Dominant Authorities

As noted above, it was said that the top management at Organization U espoused collegiality and service, which contrasted with background societal expectations of instrumentality, small circle, top-down governance, and employee deference and silence. For example, Ms. L observed that the leadership preferred staff with independent minds to contribute ideas, rather than requiring them to be obedient.
Other Moderating Factors

The impact of gaps between espoused and embedded human resource values at Organization U may have been moderated by relational proximity to dominant authorities. Also, as in Agency A and Company L, and as in Figure 2, to the extent that any burdens and implicit contributions remained invisible to dominant authorities, this invisibility may have been moderated by diligent beliefs and by proximal appreciation and support.

Relational Proximity to Dominant Authorities

As already noted above, Ms. K reported a close relationship with her boss and Ms. L reported that she had a close relationship with another topmost manager.

Diligent Beliefs and Proximal Appreciation and Support

These were generally evident in the interviewees’ accounts, and we shall take Mr. L as an illustration. He said that he wanted to serve the institution and that he felt a strong sense of belonging to it. He added:

“We sometimes receive rewards such as thank you cards or emails from students. We’re very happy about that because it gives job satisfaction.... The boss will give verbal recognition for our good work. Sometimes, he gives us small gifts... We are thankful for his appreciation.

DISCUSSION

We acknowledge that the relatively small number of case sites and interviewees, especially in Company L and Organization U, may limit the generalizability of the grounded model in Figure 2. Further research could serve to refine the model and adapt it to other industrial and cultural contexts. Another limitation, in our analysis of differences between the case study sites, was our exclusive reliance on qualitative data for judgments about where particular organizations or people stood on various theoretical dimensions, such as the degree of emphasis on instrumentality at a particular site, and the extent of an interviewee’s compatibility with embedded values. Further testing of the model could incorporate quantitative methods to measure inter-organizational and inter-individual differences.
Implications for Theory

Notwithstanding the scope for more extensive empirical grounding, Figure 2 emerged from in-depth analysis of representational predicaments and their various antecedents, moderators and consequences at three case study sites in the specific cultural context of Hong Kong. Although there were similar antecedents in the macro environment, the three sites manifested contrasting representational climates, giving rise to very different apparent incidence levels of representational predicaments, and consequent distress.

One way to understand the causal logic of the theorized antecedents to representational predicaments is to imagine what an employee experiencing representational predicaments might need to do in order to remove them by tackling their roots. He or she would face the challenge of altering the representational climate so as to move it toward high fidelity meritocracy. This would entail two steps: first, making invisible contributions and or invisible burdens visible to dominant authorities, and second, persuading them to select a wider range of employee work-life space domains to feature in PIEs, and/or to embrace more accurate measures of these domains (see also Figure 1). If, however, embedded human resource values were characterized by assumptions of top down governance and employee deference, as was the case at Agency A and Company L, it is unlikely that the employee would even be able to complete the first step of communicating his or her predicaments to dominant authorities. In the unlikely event that normative barriers to upward communication were somehow overcome, the second step, which entails persuading dominant authorities to embrace the employee’s perspective regarding the demands and burdens of the job situation, would likely be blocked if, as at Agency A, embedded human resource values were to be characterized by aggressive instrumentality. High fidelity meritocracy requires dominant authorities to judge the employees’ work on its own merits and to empathize with the employee’s burdens and sacrifices. Aggressive instrumentality, by contrast, violates Kantian ethics (Kant 1785/1949) by treating people, i.e. employees and customers, as nothing other than means to some other ends, e.g. profitability. Hence the forlorn voice of Ms. M:

“This is an insurance company and all these efforts are ‘no production’. Management won’t understand your efforts.”

In the case of Hong Kong, various extra-organizational antecedents render collective action to rectify representational predicaments unlikely. First, the cultural value of large
power distance (Wong and Birnbaum-Moore 1994) militates against direct collective challenges to authority. Second, the cultural assumption that upward influence is built through networking toward those in authority (Redding 1990), points to an alternative path (more about this shortly). Third, masculinity as a cultural value (Wong and Birnbaum-Moore 1994) focuses collective attention on hard work and material benefits rather than on quality of life issues such as representational predicaments. Fourth, even if Ms M and her peers were to agree that they had a strong moral case for collective action to protest against representational injustice, they would likely be further deterred from joining forces by the absence of labour rights and protections, and by their reciprocal: management’s right to remove so-called ‘troublemakers’ at will (Anonymous 1996; Ng 2001).

We now consider the logic of the moderating factors. An employee might remove a representational predicament without rectifying the representational climate, if he or she could capitalize or relational proximity to dominant authorities, by arranging for otherwise invisible concerns to be treated as special case, as with Ms. T at Agency A. Another moderating factor is employee compatibility with embedded values. Representational predicaments may not matter to some employees, for example, super sales people such as Mr. D at Company L, so long as they continue to excel on domains featuring in PIEs. However, employee compatibility with embedded values may decline over time, as with the faded stars and their discarded trophies mentioned by Mr. T at Agency A. Where the domains that happen to feature in PIEs are not accurately assessed, willingness to use false impression management techniques is, for employees who are not ethically averse to using them, another manifestation of compatibility with embedded values, as in the case of Mr. A at Company L.

Two further sets of moderating factors require theoretical explanation. Regarding the first of these, Figure 2 proposes two moderating factors that account for why, unlike Agency A and Company L, the representational climate at Organization U approached high fidelity meritocracy. First, Organization U differed from the other two sites, both business organizations, in that various stakeholders expected organizations within this particular public sector industry segment to engage in open governance benchmarking. Open governance offers employees more scope legitimately to bring issues to the attention of dominant authorities before they become representational predicaments. Thus the committee system allowed Mr. H to gain recognition for handling the case of the sulky consultant architect, which might otherwise have remained invisible to dominant authorities. Similarly,
as indicated by Ms. R, the grievance procedure instituted at Organization U offered protection against invisible toxic exposure. Official values of the dominant authorities at Organization U made a difference, too, by legitimizing collegiality and service, which employees could refer to when describing contributions that otherwise might have remained invisible, and by legitimizing independent thinking, a value that in turn legitimizes upward communication, essential for rectifying representational predicaments.

The final set of moderators, proximal appreciation/support and diligent beliefs, appear to take much of the sting out of embedded human resource values, encouraging employees to continue to make invisible contributions and/or endure invisible burdens. For example, interviews at Agency A illustrated that a supportive community, an underground economy, client appreciation, and diligent beliefs reinforce contextual rationality (Townley 2002), and constitute windfalls to employers. These moderating variables nonetheless fail to rectify ethical wrongs arising from the misrepresentation entailed by representational predicaments.

**Implications for Practice**

We suggest two practical implications for those dominant authorities, who aspire to social responsibility. First, they could work toward creating high-fidelity meritocracies by engaging in dialogue with subordinate staff at all levels, using Figure 1 as a reference point, with the aim of identifying invisible employee work-life domains, i.e. those that are absent from PIEs, and ways to assess these fairly and accurately. Second, they could engage in best practice open governance benchmarking. Stronger moral foundations would help employers feel safer to express assertive voice, and would provide them with greater protection when challenging canonical PIEs which are low in fidelity and unfavorable, thus reducing the instance and severity of representational predicaments.
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June 2005
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