

# **Using abstract concepts in impact-focused organisational research: An empirical example deploying 'hospitality'**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This paper conceptualises and examines the processes through which abstract concepts, or abstractions, can be utilised in co-creating knowledge within 'impact-focused' organisational and business research i.e. applied research that primarily seeks to promote change in practice rather than principally aiming to make theoretical contributions to academic debates. The paper uses the abstraction 'hospitality' as an empirical example and discusses the techniques used to 'operationalise' this concept i.e. make it understandable for research participants enabling researchers to use it within data generation and the creation of practical insights in organisational enquiry.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

The study employed two methods: firstly, participant generated photos; and secondly, two interactive workshops with 38 practitioners where the abstract concept 'hospitality' was used to generate practical organisational insights.

### **Findings**

The paper distinguishes between four stages: the elaboration of abstraction; concretisation of abstraction; probing perspectives on abstraction; and exploring experiences of abstraction. It is argued that utilising specific techniques within these four stages facilitates: a) *recognisability*: the extent to which organisational stakeholders understand the content and meanings of the abstraction; and b) *relatability*: the extent to which stakeholders appreciate how the abstract concepts are relevant to interpreting their own practices and experiences.

### **Research limitations/implications**

This is an exploratory study, used to develop and refine elicitation techniques, rather than to draw definitive conclusions about the applicability of specific abstract concepts. Nevertheless, reflecting on the processes and techniques used in the utilisation of abstractions here can help to operationalise them in future impact-focused research.

### **Originality/value**

The paper conceptualises the processes through which abstract concepts can be made apprehendable for non-specialist, non-academic practitioners. In doing so, it discusses how various elicitation techniques support the utilisation of abstractions in generating insights that can support the development of constructive, context-specific practices in organisations and businesses.

### **Keywords**

abstract concepts; elicitation techniques; hospitality; organisation studies; research impact; visual methods

## **Introduction**

There are a number of potential sources of tension between academic research and organisational practice. Firstly, academic research based on abstract concepts, which may not be understood by non-specialists or easily applied in organisational practice, can lead to a disconnection between academics and management practitioners (Miller, Greenwood and Prakash, 2009; Perriton and Hodgson 2013; Starkey and Madan, 2001). Secondly, research within the positivist paradigm seeks to utilise clearly defined, controllable variables, the effects of which can be measured quantitatively. The challenge with such methods is that the use of pre-existing measures, which are defined by the researchers, cannot accommodate emerging issues or account for contextual factors in the same way as more flexible, dynamic qualitative methods. These tensions represent one driving force for engaging in research endeavours that a) take a more open, holistic and inductive approach to understanding organisational processes and experiences, and b) enable the transfer of knowledge from academic to practitioner spheres. It is also important to be mindful of the broader socio-political and economic context in which research is funded and evaluated. There is increasing pressure on universities and academics to engage in research that has utility value and measurable impacts beyond academia (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler, 2014). Valuing research only in terms of its utility and adopting narrow indicators of 'impact' is highly problematic (Chubb and Watermeyer, 2016). Nevertheless, the principle of impact-focus has a significant and constructive role in shaping organisational and management research (Biggart, 2016).

'Impact-focused organisational and business research' can be thought of as a particular genre of enquiry. It can be defined as research-based endeavours that seek to co-create knowledge with practitioners to facilitate reflection on practices and to trigger meaningful, positive change in them, when it is deemed necessary. The emphasis here is less on theoretical abstraction (i.e. academic knowledge) but is instead on contextual practice (i.e. applied knowledge in a particular social-spatial-temporal setting). Nevertheless, the development of impactful, applied insights still draws on abstract (academic) concepts, or abstractions, terms used interchangeably in this paper. A significant challenge in realising such impact-focused research is translation: the ability to make complex, abstract concepts understandable, meaningful, and contextually applicable to non-specialist practitioner audiences. Academics have debated at some length the importance of, and tensions associated with, translation practices that enable people from disparate fields and disciplines to interact meaningfully (see e.g. Collins, 2011; Collins, Evans and Gorman, 2007; Collins, Evans, Ribeiro and Hall, 2006; Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner, 2009; van Grinsven, Heusinkveld and Cornelissen, 2016). Academics have also examined the broad processes of translation through which consultants, educators and managers disseminate management concepts within professional interactions (cf. Heusinkveld and Visscher, 2012; Lamb, Örtenblad and Hsu, 2016; Teulier and Rouleau, 2013; von Platen, 2015). However, there continues to be a need to identify and discuss, in practical terms, the processes through which complex, abstract concepts can be utilised in impact-focused organisational and business research. Consequently, this paper conceptualises and evaluates the process of using abstractions to engage organisational stakeholders. Specifically, the paper draws on an impact-focused

project that utilises the concept of ‘hospitality’ to examine practices and experiences in organisations and to create avenues for impactful intervention through raising awareness of practical issues and creating practice-based solutions.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part discusses the notion of impact-focused research and considers the role of abstractions within such forms of enquiry. A distinction is drawn between the use of abstract concepts as latent variables in positivist research, abstract concepts that are developed through inductive analysis and abstract concepts that are used as sensitising concepts in qualitative research, which is the focus of this paper. It is argued that abstractions as sensitising concepts may underpin impact-focused research, but their complexity and esoteric qualities may also undermine practitioner interest and engagement. Moreover, the paper posits that two specific challenges shape interest and engagement among practitioners: ‘recognisability’, the extent to which non-specialists understand the contents and meaning(s) of abstract concepts; and ‘relatability’, the extent to which non-specialists perceive those concepts to be relevant to interpreting their practices and experiences.

The paper presents an empirical example of an impact-focused organisational enquiry, focusing in particular on the strategies adopted to facilitate recognisability and relatability. This illustrative exemplar used the concept of ‘hospitality’ to understand organisational practice. The second section of the paper thus introduces ‘hospitality’ and synthesises recent literature to outline how, despite its abstract nature, it can be applied to examine organisations and people’s experiences of them.

The third section of the paper discusses in detail the processes through which ‘hospitality’ was utilised with non-academic practitioners in the empirical case. It begins by outlining the study protocols before discussing four separate stages, and the techniques through which the abstraction was used to generate impact-focused findings. The fourth section of the paper reflects on the data generation processes more generally, evaluating the techniques employed to aid recognisability and relatability, and their potential use in similar research endeavours. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for future impact-focused research.

### **Impact-focused organisational research and abstractions**

The notion of impactful or change-oriented organisational research is well-established: ‘action research’ and ‘participatory action research’ in particular places organisational intervention at the centre of the research endeavour (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007; McNiff, 2013; Stringer, 2014). Similarly, academics and practicing consultants have argued that consultancy also uses research competencies and techniques to solve ‘real-world’ problems and drive organisational transformation (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Canato and Giangreco, 2011; Lapsley and Oldfield, 2001). However, impact-focus or impact-centricity has taken on a new, politicised dimension in recent years. The growing demands on state funders who support research, coupled with constrictions on funds available to public bodies has driven the emergence of the impacts discourse in research (Bastow *et al.*, 2014; Martin, 2011; Rogers, Bear, Hunt, Mills and Sandover, 2014).

The value of research is increasingly being determined by researchers’ ability to demonstrate its utility for society, culture, economy and the environment (Bornmann and Marx, 2014). Although there are numerous routes to impact, a significant factor in creating and demonstrating impact is the ability to engage with a broader set of

publics than in 'pure' research aimed principally at academic audiences. This is particularly important in organisational and management research, which has been criticised for its disconnection from organisational end-users (Miller *et al.*, 2009; Perriton and Hodgson, 2013; Starkey and Madan, 2001).

A significant problem inhibiting practitioner engagement is the use of abstract concepts. Abstractions in research can be conceptualised and utilised in a number of ways. Within positivist studies abstractions take the form of latent variables that cannot be observed directly, but are instead measured through a series of proxy or manifest variables (Baxter, 2009; Gray and Densten, 1998). An example of such abstract concepts would include 'organisational climate', which can be measured using a combination of individual questionnaire items such as 'This company cares about its employees' (Patterson, West, Shackleton, Dawson, Lawthom, Maitlis, Robinson, and Wallace, 2005).

Within inductive, qualitative research, abstractions may take the form of higher-order constructs developed through the coding and analysis of primary data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2015). However, abstractions may be utilised as more loosely defined 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer, 1954), such as 'identity' for example, or more specified constructs within theoretical or conceptual frameworks, to determine the scope and focus of a study, and to clarify the ontological and epistemological positions being adopted. Examples would include concepts such as 'performativity' or 'habitus' (cf. Tyler and Cohen, 2010; Vaara and Faÿ, 2012).

Scale validation in quantitative research and the analytical techniques in qualitative endeavours have been discussed extensively, and it is the final notion of abstraction that is considered in this paper. The operationalization of concepts in data generation and analysis requires researchers to conceptualise them at particular levels of abstraction (cf. Frew, 2006; Hogg, Banister and Stephenson, 2009; Shrum, Wong, Arif, Chugani *et al.*, 2013). However, the challenge emerges when abstractions as sensitising or driving constructs are utilised explicitly within the research process, as this case demonstrates.

Two particular issues appear to be important to this process of utilising abstractions: 'recognisability' and 'relatability'. Recognisability can be defined as the extent to which research participants understand the content and meaning(s) of an abstract concept. Relatability can be defined as the extent to which research participants perceive an abstract concept to be relevant to understanding their own practices and experiences i.e. how much it relates to what they think, feel and do. The challenge in conducting impact-focused organisational research is to operationalize complex abstractions to ensure recognisability and relatability, which facilitates dialogue between academics and practitioners, leading to reflection among practitioners, the development of new practices and thus future impacts. Consequently, it is important and timely to examine in detail how such abstractions can be utilised. The remaining parts of this paper examine one such endeavour, using the empirical example of an impact-focused organisational enquiry, which utilised the concept of hospitality. The next section thus introduces the concept of hospitality and outlines how it can inform organisational enquiry and practice.

## **Hospitality as abstraction in organisational research**

The principles and practices of hospitality have been explored by social scientists from disparate disciplines as well as business scholars interested in how it is produced, managed and consumed (cf. Lashley, Lynch and Morrison, 2007; Germann-Molz and Gibson, 2007). Brotherton's (1999, p.168) oft-cited definition of hospitality suggests it is 'a contemporaneous human exchange, which is voluntarily entered into, and designed to enhance the mutual wellbeing of the parties concerned through the provision of accommodation, and/or food, and/or drink'. This definition stems from a hospitality management perspective and it has been critiqued for emphasising mutual wellbeing, which ignores asymmetries of power, and for focusing narrowly on provision, especially of food, drink and accommodation (cf. Lashley, Lynch and Morrison, 2007; Lugosi, 2009; Morrison and O'Gorman, 2008).

Alternatively, following Dikeç (2002), hospitality can be thought of more broadly as the construction of inclusive physical and symbolic spaces, albeit often temporarily, which suggests the lowering of boundaries in attempts to overcome or negotiate difference. However, as Lynch, Germann Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi and Lashley (2011) argue, the provision of hospitality evokes obligations to accept it, to conform to the rules of its transaction and to reciprocate. It is often deployed, instrumentally, to negotiate potentially harmful relationships as well as to articulate power, status and hierarchy rather than as altruistic acts (cf. Candea and Da Col, 2012; Lashley, 2008; Selwyn, 2000).

The enactment of hospitality may involve food, drink and other stimulants, including tobacco and legal or illegal drugs, alongside entertaining or engaging interaction as people create shared social spaces, although these elements are not always present. Food, drink and stimulants are not always part of the hospitality proposition; hospitality may also be enacted through technology and materiality rather than through embodied interactions. Furthermore, following Lugosi (2009), it is also important to recognise that hospitality is co-created: any notion of welcome may not emerge from intentional acts of provision by individuals, groups or organisations; rather, a sense of welcome or perceptions of inclusion may actually emerge as mental constructions projected over spaces, objects and human interactions.

Recent work has explored how hospitality could be applied to the study of organisations (Lugosi, 2011, 2014). Lugosi (2014) argued that academics in organisation and management studies have considered a series of topics related to hospitality. For example, work has examined the embodied performances of sociality in the workplace (Dale, 2005; Tyler and Cohen, 2011, Valentine, 2002), the role of social interactions in shaping organisational practices (Chang and Chen, 2015; Fayard and Weeks, 2007; Waring and Bishop, 2010), the connections between space and materiality in organisational experiences (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Hindmarsh and Heath, 2000; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004) and the role of food and drink in shaping organisational relationships (Altman and Baruch, 2010; Cunha, Cabral-Cardoso and Clegg, 2008; Mitchell, Boyle, Burgess and McNeil, 2014; Strangleman, 2010). However, Lugosi (2014) went on to argue that, rather than considering these issues in isolation, using hospitality as a focal point enables researchers to consider the intersections of issues surrounding food, drink, embodiment, relationships, interactions, materiality, space, power and inclusion or exclusion. This can, he suggested, help to conceptualise the multiple ways that employees, management, customers and various other

stakeholders experience organisations. Furthermore, it can help to understand the processes through which those experiences are constructed.

Drawing on an extended review and synthesis of relevant literature from across the social sciences and humanities, Lugosi (2014) proposed that six dimensions of hospitality were relevant in such analysis:

1. Hospitality involves gestures of welcoming and the creation of inclusive physical and symbolic spaces.
2. Acts of hospitality may involve food, drink and other stimulants alongside engaging social interaction; however, not all of these elements are always present.
3. Transactions of hospitality have associated formal and informal norms, for example regarding giving, receiving and reciprocating.
4. Gestures of welcome or inclusion do not apply to everyone: some people are overtly excluded from spaces whilst others exclude themselves.
5. Beyond the human dimensions of hospitality, its material aspects make some people feel welcome, safe or comfortable in places, whilst evoking opposite feelings in others.
6. Hospitality may be deployed in organisations to maintain the status quo, but employees and temporary visitors to organisation may use practices of hospitality to resist existing norms and create alternative social spaces.

The focus on these six dimensions, rather than, for example, on some of the philosophical aspects, was adopted for several reasons: firstly, these emphasise the concrete, practiced elements of hospitality that emerge in everyday organisational experiences, and thus already foreground and utilise the relatability of the concept. This seeks to highlight that this abstract concept can be used to (re)imagine and understand people's organisational practices. Secondly, focusing on the exercise of power, alongside ascriptions and performances of identity, status and roles are central features of critical organisational studies, which seeks to problematize taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, thus prompting participants to (re)evaluate their practices and encourage them to transform them where appropriate.

In addition to synthesising the six dimensions of hospitality, Lugosi (2014) outlined how they emerged in and were thus related to organisational practices. He distinguished between 'externally oriented' and 'internally organised' hospitality suggesting that it was relevant to examining the dynamics and outcomes of practices in multiple organisational contexts. Specifically, hospitality may be extended to external stakeholders, for example customers, potential clients, contractors or other visitors, as 'tactical' or 'strategic enchantment', to establish power relations, invoke obligations to conform to organisational norms and reciprocate as appropriate. During initial encounters between the organisation and external stakeholders, this includes creating reception areas and interactional rituals that welcomed people into organisational spaces, but also delimited their statuses and roles (cf. Cavell, 2009, 2012; Heracleous and Johnston, 2009). Examples of 'tactical enchantment' include retail or service settings where customers are given 'free' food, drinks or other gifts to encourage longer 'dwell time' and create obligations to purchase. Other examples are the reception and assignment of 'guest' statuses to organisational visitors through

issuing them with temporary passes to buildings and access to wi-fi networks, which clarifies their roles, rights and obligations.

'Strategic enchantment' extends to establishing and maintaining ongoing relationships with clientele, shareholders or other stakeholders. This includes the rituals of business lunches where different parties can display their statuses and clarify the terms of subsequent transactional relationships (cf. Adams, Adams and Seff, 2000; Jay, 2006; Dienhart and Pinsel, 1984). Similarly, the offer of corporate hospitality uses food, drink and entertainment to strengthen affective ties and invoke obligations to reciprocate through future trade, investment, recommendation or service provision (cf. Chetwynd, 2000; Hughes, 2000; Roger, 2003).

Hospitality may also be used internally by organisational stakeholders, as 'entrenchment', to perpetuate existing norms and hierarchies. For example, practices of welcoming offer ways to integrate new members into organisations (cf. Connelly, 2005). Rituals of eating and drinking during work and outside the workplace are also part of organisational life (cf. Altman and Baruch, 2010; Flores-Pereira, Davel and Cavendon, 2008; Lindén and Nyberg, 2009; Thomson and Hassenkamp, 2008), helping people to construct group identity and interdependence whilst also enacting power relationships and hierarchies (cf. Lee, 2001; Stroebeak, 2013, Valentine, 2002). However, Lugosi (2014) also suggested that practices of hospitality, for example extra-organisational social gatherings, which often involve food and drink, or common practices of smoking, can create alternative organisational spaces and networks, and it may thus help to reconfigure power relationships, becoming focal points of resistance.

The challenge lay in utilising the abstract concept of hospitality in organisational research. The remaining parts of this paper examine the processes through which the abstraction was operationalized in an impact-focused enquiry to elicit insights regarding people's experiences of organisations.

### **Utilising hospitality as abstraction**

The utilisation (or practical operationalisation) of the abstraction 'hospitality' within this project culminated in two, 45-minute interactive workshops that sought to examine the interactions of hospitality and organisational experiences. The workshops were held as part of a university's staff development week, which regularly features academics who are asked to introduce applied and non-applied research to practitioners (rather than academics).

In summary, the workshops used the following protocols: the initial invitation gave a brief description of hospitality, based on the six key dimensions identified above, and asked participants to capture and send to the facilitator, prior to the workshop, images that reflected or exemplified one or more of those features of hospitality in their experiences. The workshop began with a further introduction to the key dimensions of hospitality using various concrete examples to help recognisability of the concept, which in turn enabled participants appreciate how it may be relevant to understanding their practices (i.e. relatability). The participants, sitting in groups of 3-4, then discussed how hospitality was evident in their experiences. They were given pens and paper and encouraged to write and draw specific examples. The next section involved a group discussion, where the different examples of hospitality were shared and discussed in greater detail. The workshop finished with the facilitator summarising



key issues and reflecting on how these may be utilised in participants' future practices. These protocols are discussed in further detail below.

The 38 workshop participants were members of the institution's administrative staff and represented a range of functional areas and roles. Importantly, the workshops did not seek to generate primary data for research purposes so no personal data were gathered from participants. The principal aim of these workshops was to explore and share knowledge of organisational practice, which employees could subsequently draw on when reflecting upon their experiences, and, if appropriate, use to develop alternative practices. However, the workshops necessitated the utilisation of abstract academic concepts. Consequently, they provided important opportunities to experiment with procedures for utilising hospitality as an abstraction and to trial elicitation techniques that could be used in future applied research to prompt topic-focused thinking amongst participants, drive conversations and thus generate data.

Specifically, the workshops helped to distinguish between four stages in the utilisation of the abstraction, summarised in Figure 1: 1) *Elaboration of abstraction* i.e. the explanation of the concepts, including the provision of definitions; 2) *Concretisation of abstraction*, which involves giving specific examples of the abstract concept in (everyday) practice using textual and visual illustrations; 3) *Probing perspectives on abstraction*, which refers to the brief given to participants and the prompts or questions used to stimulate topic-focused thinking and discussion; and 4) *Exploring experiences of abstraction*, the discussions through which participants examined their experiences of the abstract concepts and its dimensions in their (everyday) organisational practices. These first three stages sought to facilitate recognisability and relatability of the abstraction. This paved the way for the fourth stage, which explored the experiences of the abstraction, thus helping to demonstrate recognisability and relatability, as evidenced in the contributions of the workshop participants. The remaining parts of this section elaborate on the four stages.

Figure 1 Key stages in the utilisation of abstraction

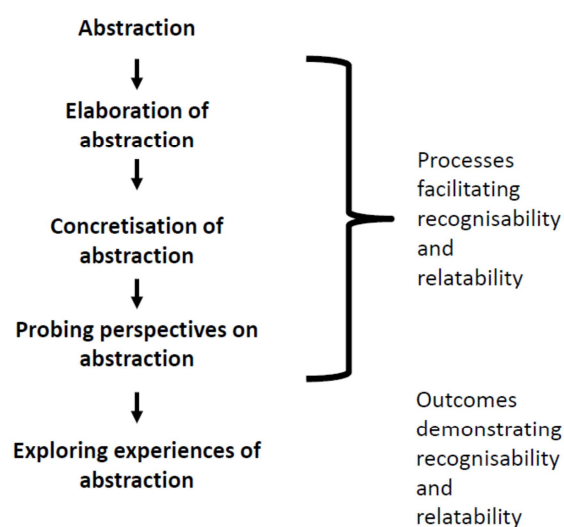


Figure 2 Detailed processes in the utilisation of abstraction

Abstraction	Elaboration of abstraction	Concretisation of abstraction	Probing perspectives on abstraction (The brief and prompts)	Exploring experiences of abstraction
Hospitality	<p>1. It involves gestures of welcoming and the creation of inclusive physical and symbolic spaces.</p> <p>2. Acts of hospitality often involve food, drink and other stimulants, including tobacco and legal or illegal drugs, alongside entertaining or engaging interaction as people create shared social spaces, although these elements are not always present.</p> <p>3. Transactions of hospitality have associated rules, for example of giving, receiving and reciprocating food, drink, social interaction etc.</p> <p>4. Notions of welcome or inclusion do not apply to everyone: some people are overtly excluded from spaces e.g. because they do not have access to physical parts of the organisation. Some people <i>feel</i> excluded e.g. because they are outsiders to social groups, they do not know others, they are from different cultures, have no shared interests etc.</p> <p>5. People are often key to the provision of hospitality, but material objects, e.g. furniture, doorways and signage, are also important features of organisations that make some people feel welcome, safe or comfortable in places, whilst evoking different feelings in others.</p> <p>6. Hospitality may be used to maintain the status quo in organisations, but employees and other visitors to the organisation (e.g. clients, customers) may use practices of hospitality to resist existing rules and regulations.</p>	<p><i>Externally oriented hospitality, e.g.:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Comfortable reception areas</li> <li>-Welcome protocols (greetings, offer of refreshments while waiting etc.)</li> <li>-Access to wireless networks</li> <li>-Assigning 'guest' status e.g. visitor pass</li> <li>-Corporate hospitality events for clients and stakeholders</li> </ul> <p><i>Internally organised hospitality, e.g.:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Catered meetings</li> <li>-Coffee breaks</li> <li>-Staff lunches and breaks</li> <li>-Sharing of cakes and snacks</li> <li>-Staff parties</li> <li>-Shared cigarette breaks</li> <li>-After dinner drinks</li> </ul>	<p>-Identify experiences of hospitality and inhospitality in and around work</p> <p>-What makes it (in)hospitable, how and why?</p> <p>Think about the: people places activities objects sounds smells etc. that make it (in)hospitable)</p> <p>-Think about externally oriented and internally organised hospitality</p> <p>-Tasks: <i>In advance of workshop:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Send images or videos</li> <li>• Send stories</li> </ul> <p><i>During workshop:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draw pictures</li> <li>• Write words</li> <li>• Create maps</li> <li>• Annotate sent images (posted on walls during workshop) to communicate experiences</li> </ul>	<p>Emerging themes:</p> <p>-Comparison of departments and the types of internal/external stakeholders encountered</p> <p>-Examples of good practice, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social activities involving eating and drinking</li> <li>• 'Footprint' stickers that guide visitors</li> <li>• Service promises and accreditation</li> <li>• Positive rather than negatively worded signage and documents</li> </ul> <p>-Example of poor practice, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unfriendly staff greeting people on arrival</li> <li>• Lack of eating and drinking facilities</li> <li>• Lack of parking for visitors</li> </ul> <p>-Cultural issues, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims and cultures of drinking</li> <li>• British tea drinking and non-British colleagues</li> <li>• Differing experiences of part-time and full time employees</li> </ul> <p>-Challenges of implementing initiatives</p> <p>-Solutions to proposed challenges of implementation</p>

### ***Elaboration of abstraction***

In order to begin to make the abstraction recognisable and apprehendable to potential participants, during the recruitment they were presented with the six key features of hospitality identified above (and summarised in the left hand column of Figure 2). The brief also highlighted that hospitality: 1) may be extended to or oriented towards external stakeholders (e.g. clients and other visitors) to create positive impressions, establish relationships but also to control their behaviour and exclude unwanted visitors; and 2) emerges within organisational practices to communicate values, maintain relationships and norms, and create a shared sense of identity. In order to underpin relatability and facilitate the co-creation process, potential participants were asked to take images on mobile devices of places, objects, people and behaviours that evoke feelings of hospitality in this and other organisations and also those that conjure opposite feelings, and to send them to the workshop leader. Participants were also encouraged to send short comments or longer written accounts of (in)hospitality, although none were received. The aim was to use the images (and commentary) to stimulate conversation. As Slutskaya, Simson and Hughes (2012) note, photo elicitation is often a useful way to capture contextual aspects of participants' lives. In this case, it was also a way for participants to connect abstract themes to their own experiences. 30 images were sent prior to the workshops: these were printed and stuck on the walls of the rooms in which the sessions were held. Some of the images were also utilised in the explanatory parts of the workshops during which the abstraction could be made concrete.

### ***Concretisation of abstraction***

The concretisation of the abstraction was an explicit attempt to facilitate recognisability. It relied on exemplifying, through words and images, the different dimensions of hospitality as they are manifested in everyday social and material ways. The workshops began with an introductory brief, which repeated the themes from the elaboration stage, and expanded the explanation using a series of example images to concretise the abstraction. This included the participant-generated images of reception areas, organisational entrances, signage, and examples of workplace eating and drinking places and practices. The elaboration of abstraction sought to support recognisability by seeking to 'unpack' the concept in terms that could be understood by participants. As summarised in the second column of Figure 2, it was explained that the workshops sought to explore externally oriented and internally organised hospitality (following Lugosi, 2014). The written and verbal brief thus suggested that this may include the design of entrances, waiting areas, procedures for greeting visitors, security arrangements, visitor access to facilities, IT services and wireless networks, corporate hospitality, catered public events, hosting clients and stakeholders for lunch, dinner etc. The brief also suggested that this could include: tea and coffee breaks, catered meetings, welcoming new colleagues, drinking-fountain conversations, cigarette breaks, lunches, after-work drinks, collegiate celebrations of birthdays and anniversaries, staff parties etc. Within the verbal and written brief, participants were also encouraged to think about: places they visit in and around the workplace to be away from colleagues, clients, students etc., and to: consider the social and material factors, including sights, sounds, smells, temperatures, and issues of time, that make some places feel welcome, safe and comfortable, and factors that

disrupt these experiences and create negative feelings. In doing so, the facilitator had a key role in communicating the relatability of the concept to their everyday experiences. This elaboration process paved the way for the next stage, during which their contextualised experiences of the abstraction could begin to be explored.

### ***Probing perspectives on abstraction***

In principle, probing perspectives on abstraction, and attempts to facilitate relatability, began prior to the workshop when potential participants were asked to relate elements of hospitality to their own experiences through their self-generated images. Within the workshops, participants were asked to consider hospitable and inhospitable experiences in and around work, explore what made them (in)hospitable, how and why (see Figure 2 column 3 for a summary of probing techniques). Participants were asked to work in groups of 3-4 to communicate their experiences: they were given paper and pens and invited to draw, write words, create maps and annotate the photos sent prior to the workshop, which were displayed on the walls. The final part of the workshops involved a group discussion where emerging issues were explored. The group discussion was recorded and the facilitator summarised emerging themes on the white board using a 2 x 2 matrix: externally oriented – internally organised hospitality along one axis and hospitable – inhospitable along the other.

### ***Exploring experiences of abstraction: Indicative outcomes***

The exploration stage, and the participant-generated illustrations and discussions of the abstract concept in relation to their practices, demonstrate the extent of recognisability and relatability and the effectiveness of the elicitation techniques used in the previous three stages. The workshop discussions highlighted a number of thematic areas, which are summarised in the far right column of Figure 2. Participants identified examples of poor practice, which included the lack of adequate parking for visitors, the limited range of food available to the culturally and ethnically diverse range of colleagues and users, the presence of unwelcoming staff who greeted visitors to the organisation and in some cases to the absence of staff who could welcome and orientate visitors. However, participants also included examples of good social and material practices in certain parts of the organisation. For instance, members of the Estates Management Team identified that they created adhesive printed footprints to help orientate visitors and guide them to different parts of the campus. They had also drawn up 'service promises' and sought accreditation for their practices from a professional body – the Institute of Hospitality. They also highlighted how they changed the tone of signage from negative instructions to positive ones: so the signs 'Do not put your foot on the furniture' were replaced with 'Thank you for appreciating the furniture'. In a similar vein, participants identified the limitations of negatively-worded guidance documents given to students on arrival and how these were changed to positively oriented ones. Beyond highlighting the practices, participants' contributions emphasised the reflective learning that prompted the changes, which subsequently helped to develop positively framed encounters with visitors and services users.

Participants also highlighted a number of mundane social practices including the bringing of cakes, periodic colleague lunches and other informal gatherings where tea

and other beverages were consumed. Importantly, emphasising such activities also highlighted how these excluded some others, for example, non-British colleagues who did not drink tea or Muslim colleagues who did not consume alcohol. It also highlighted that some colleagues, part-time staff and those with parental responsibilities particularly, did not or could not participate in social events because they took place on days or at times when they were not at work.

Examples of good and bad practice also led to conversations regarding how other colleagues experienced similar practices and how conflicts could be addressed. For example, the sharing of teabags or milk caused tensions when it was felt transactions were not fully symmetric and reciprocal. Other colleagues then suggested ways to resolve this, for example using a collective fund system to which everyone contributed to resolve conflicts between individuals. Beyond identifying thematic research themes, the workshop thus provided opportunities for co-creating knowledge that could be implemented in future practice.

In summary the illustrations and reflective discussions of social, temporal, material and spatial issues and practices suggest that participants understood the key dimensions of hospitality (recognisability). Moreover, the discussions, including the ability to problematize elements, and in cases identify solutions, also suggest that participants could relate the dimensions of the abstract concept to their everyday experiences. However, it is important to avoid over-stating the effectiveness of these approaches in an impact-focused endeavour. Drawing concrete conclusions about the utilisation of the abstract concepts, using these elicitation techniques, requires much more detailed longitudinal post-‘intervention’ evaluation.

## **Discussion**

The complex nature of organisational encounters requires a range of innovative, experimental techniques to understand its different dimensions, and recent work has demonstrated the usefulness of reflecting on the processes and methods used to examine social experiences (cf. Harris, Jackson, Mayblin, Piekut and Valentine, 2015; Mayblin, Valentine, Kossak and Schneider, 2016). The techniques used in this study highlight the potential of a range of elicitation techniques to help explore people’s experiences and generate practical insights, although the techniques require refinement. Future workshops would most likely conform to more traditional focus groups formats: involving fewer participant and lasting for longer periods. However, this research endeavour has helped to conceptualise and reflect on the processes and techniques that can be used to utilise abstractions in this context and in related studies, which can underpin such workshops.

Visual research techniques have multiple applications in the utilisation of abstractions. Visual methods are increasingly being deployed in organisational and management research. This can involve using images as elicitation tools within interviews, researcher-generated visual material, content analysis of visual representations of organisations and participant-generated visual material in the form of drawings, photographs and moving images (cf. Bell, Warren and Schroeder, 2014; Bramming, Gorm Hansen, Bojesen and Gylling Olesen, 2012; Comi, Bischof and Eppler, 2014; Davison, McLean and Warren, 2012; Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes, 2012). Importantly, this study has highlighted how the deployment of images in the briefing can help to concretise the abstraction, supporting the recognisability of the concept,

which in turn can support relatability: participants' ability to interpret their experiences in relation to the abstraction. Furthermore, participant-generated visual data can also be used to probe perspectives on experiences of abstraction and help participants articulate their experiences of those abstractions.

Arguably, the use of images and accompanying explanations in the elaboration and concretisation stages creates a set of pre-conceptions regarding how participants recognise and relate to the abstract concept. Researchers use varying levels of detail in briefing participants, ranging from broad briefs to much more prescriptive instructions on how to complete visual elicitation exercises (cf. Edgar, 2004; Kearney and Hyle, 2004; Varga-Atkins and O'Brien, 2009). Greater levels of visual and textual detail at the elaboration and concretisation stages introduces 'framing effects' (selecting and emphasising certain issues or characteristics in place of others) and 'priming effects' (making certain issues more salient, which subsequently makes these more accessible for interpreting experiences) (cf. Scheufele, 2000; Weaver, 2007). However, within impact-focused enquiry, rather than treating these as negative bias risks, they can be thought of as constructive techniques for reducing the 'cognitive load' (Varga-Atkins and O'Brien, 2009) of the exercise for participants. Consequently, rather than having to dedicate greater time and effort to interpreting concepts associated with the research brief, participants can focus on applying specific dimensions of abstract concepts to understanding their own experiences. Supporting recognisability and relatability through such mediating techniques is likely to be very important for engaging participants in the co-creation of knowledge and for creating usable solutions for further beneficiaries of the research.

This leads on to a final set of issues raised in this pilot study concerning the role of the researcher, particularly as workshop leader or facilitator. Methodological discussions of focus groups and qualitative elicitation techniques continually emphasise the crucial role of the researcher as facilitator (cf. Mayblin, Valentine and Andersson, 2015; Pink, Kürti and Alfonso, 2004; Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). In group-based research endeavours, such as focus groups and other types of experimental workshop formats (e.g. Edgar, 2004; Mayblin, Valentine and Andersson, 2016; Mayblin, Valentine, Kossak and Schneider, 2015), researchers have to facilitate constructive dialogue and often negotiate power relations between participants. Issues of power and the need for sensitivity were certainly considerations within the current empirical example: inhospitable practices may have involved colleagues present in the room. However, beyond these mediating roles, the researcher has a number of specific challenges in utilising abstractions. Firstly, leading the data gathering process relies on nuanced knowledge of the abstract concept(s) that can enable the process of translation between researcher and participant. This may make it difficult to outsource the data gathering to non-specialist researchers with superficial engagement with and thus knowledge of the topic. Alternatively, non-specialist researchers would also have to engage with elaboration and concretisation processes themselves in preparation to them leading the interactive parts of the data generation.

Secondly, in order to facilitate the concretisation and probing stages, particularly in the workshop, the researcher has to have some understanding of the organisational contexts in which participants are based. This can enable the researcher to draw upon examples and illustrations that support relatability, insofar as participants can better appreciate how abstract concepts can be used to understand their context-specific

experiences. This suggests that the utilisation of the abstraction may be facilitated by a reflexive, context-sensitive, ethnographic approach to the broader research endeavour. This can enable the researcher to better translate the concepts into examples that are more relevant and meaningful to the organisational context to support recognisability.

Finally, within the probing and final exploration stages, the researcher has to be sensitive and responsive in facilitating the examination of issues that participants identify as relevant in interpreting their experiences. For example, within this empirical example, participants identified the shift from negative to positive terminology in student-centred documentation as being relevant to projecting a more hospitable image to students. This capacity to incorporate new interpretations of the abstraction can help to extend the scope and application of the concept in understanding experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Given the rise of the impacts agenda in research and the drive to better engage non-academic stakeholders in the processes and outcomes of research, identifying practices and strategies for translating abstractions within data generation will continue to be a pressing concern. This paper has posited that in the current political-economic climate of academia, 'impact-focused organisational and business research' is an important genre of enquiry, which, rather than producing theoretical generalisations primarily for academics, seeks to stimulate reflection among practitioners that can underpin the development of context-sensitive changes to practice. This paper has attempted to conceptualise the practical steps through which abstractions can be deployed within such impact-focused research processes and to examine the challenges involved in adopting these methods in this and analogous forms of enquiry. This paper has argued that the processes of utilising abstractions are important for facilitating recognisability (i.e. the ability to understand the concept) and relatability (i.e. the ability by non-academics to appreciate how the abstract concept is relevant to their context-specific experiences). Furthermore, the paper distinguished between four stages through which abstract concepts can be deployed in organisational and management enquiry: the elaboration and concretisation of abstraction, and probing perspectives and exploring experiences of abstraction. The paper discussed how specific textual and performative practices within these four stages were utilised in the interactive workshop to elicit responses and encourage reflection among non-academic practitioners.

The findings of this paper have a number of implications for different practitioner groups. Firstly, although the organisational application of hospitality was used here primarily as an empirical example, the paper demonstrates the potential for using this abstraction by academics as an interpretative framework for researching everyday organisational practices. The paper has illustrated how translating hospitality into an apprehendable concept enables academics to examine how practitioners experience their workplace and how the organisation engages with its internal and external stakeholders through embodied, material and discursive practices. Consequently hospitality becomes a deployable concept for non-academic practitioners to prompt reflection and to potentially transform their organisational activities.

Secondly, conceptualising the practical stages and specific techniques for making abstract concepts accessible and applicable for non-academic stakeholders can inform future impact-focused enquiry and knowledge transfer activities among academics in multiple organisation and management fields. However, it must be recognised that hospitality has particular symbolic and material forms and enactments (e.g. artefacts of eating and drinking). Abstractions such as ‘empowerment’ or ‘organisational climate’ may not be so easy to capture or communicate through visual imagery, and studies exploring such concepts may not be able to utilise illustrative ‘concretisation’ activities exactly in ways deployed here. Therefore, the processes for utilising abstractions outlined here are limited to the concepts that can be made visually and materially apprehendable. Nevertheless, this attempt to make transparent the opaque processes through which abstract concepts are made usable in applied research should encourage further evaluation of practical techniques through which other (types of) abstractions are made accessible to non-academics. Consequently, this specific gesture of transparency should also be seen as a wider prompt for alternative, reflective accounts of how abstractions can and should be deployed within impact-focused organisational and business research.

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