Employee recognition at work:
A study of employee experiences

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Abstract

Despite evidence of its increasingly widespread use within organisations and a significant body of practitioner and "popular" literature on the subject, employee recognition has received relatively little empirical study by academic researchers. As a result, there are significant gaps in our knowledge, particularly around how recognition schemes actually operate in organisations and the ways in which they impact upon individuals and organisations. This thesis responds to these knowledge gaps through presenting empirical evidence collected through in-depth interviews with employees drawn from two organisations, an insurance company and a local council, about their experiences of recognition in the workplace.

Taking an inductive thematic approach to the analysis of the employees' accounts, I identify some of the key factors influencing employees' experiences of recognition, thus contributing to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees. In particular, I highlight the importance of the social and organisational context in which recognition is given and received in influencing the meanings which individuals assign to recognition. I also discuss the ways in which further factors such as the recognition scheme design and implementation, including the way in which recognition is delivered to recipients, can mediate individuals' experiences of recognition.

Drawing upon theories of gift giving, I offer interpretations of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences which identify three main important social functions fulfilled by employee recognition: the communication of information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition, the development and maintenance of social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace, and the promotion of a sense of solidarity and unity within the organisation. Furthermore, whilst offering insights into its possible positive social functions and implications, this thesis contributes to knowledge about employee recognition by drawing attention to its possible dysfunctional consequences. The findings of this thesis are useful for practitioners responsible for designing and implementing employee recognition schemes, as well as for academic researchers seeking to understand the underlying dynamics of employee recognition as a human resource management practice.

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Author's declaration

I declare that all written work, unless cited, is my own and has not been submitted for any other award at the University of York or any other institution.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this research is to explore employees' experiences of recognition. Through an interpretation of individuals' accounts of their recognition experiences, the research aims to contribute to knowledge about employee recognition by offering insights into how individuals experience and understand recognition in the workplace and its social functions and implications.

The research therefore aims to address the following research questions:

- How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?
- What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?
- What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research journey which led to the development of this thesis. I start by offering some insights into the professional experiences which contributed to my interest in this topic in order to establish the starting point of the research journey which produced this thesis. I then describe the research process through which the above research questions to be addressed by this thesis were developed. The potential empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis are highlighted by differentiating this study from the existing literature on employee recognition. Finally, a summary of each subsequent chapter is provided to orientate the reader to the structure of the thesis.

1.2 The research journey

I acknowledge that my professional experiences have contributed to my interest in developing this thesis. For six years, alongside school and university, I worked as a sales assistant at the Colwyn Bay and York branches of a well-known shoe retailer. During this time I received several recognition awards for sales performance and customer service, through both organisation-wide recognition schemes and on an informal basis from the store manager. The awards would usually be presented by the store manager in front of the rest of the team at monthly team meetings, and took the form of chocolates, vouchers for high-street stores or small items of merchandise. I still have a key-ring which I received for winning the equivalent of an "Employee of the Area" award (the award also included high-street vouchers and a framed certificate

to be displayed at the store). Competitive by nature, I took great pleasure in receiving these recognition awards. I was pleased that my efforts had been noticed by my manager and was proud to be held up as a role model for my colleagues. I felt motivated to continue to work hard in order to "live up" to this label.

Even then, I realised that some of my colleagues held different opinions about recognition awards, particularly those given as part of the company-wide recognition scheme. Some viewed the scheme as "the latest management fad" and were unimpressed by items like mugs and key-rings which they saw as "tacky" and "pointless". On several occasions, I witnessed colleagues discussing how they would rather the company spend this money on increasing the hourly rate of pay. Others who only worked a few hours a week were indifferent towards the scheme, perhaps failing to see its relevance to them. Regardless, as I write up this thesis, I recognise that I embarked upon this research journey with a generally favourable impression of the impact of recognition on employees as a result of my own positive experiences as a recipient.

Years later and now in a management position at another retail store, I attempted to implement some of the employee recognition practices I had experienced at my previous company. As well as regularly giving out informal awards of chocolates and flowers to members of my team who I felt had gone "above and beyond" what was expected of them, I encouraged the team to celebrate each other's successes by displaying customer feedback and thank-you cards in the staff room. During this time, I came to view employee recognition as an effective management tool for reinforcing desired employee behaviours and a way of ensuring that team members felt that their efforts were appreciated. For this reason, at the start of my PhD study, I was particularly drawn to the practitioner literature on employee recognition, especially Michael Rose (2011) whose uncomplicated advocacy of employee recognition schemes strongly resonated with my own positive experiences of recognition.

However, I was aware that my enthusiasm for employee recognition was not shared by other managers within the organisation. I recall being at a meeting when a colleague commented, "Well, all that touchy-feely stuff might work for you but, if I tried it with my lot, they'd laugh in my face!" The manager's use of the generally derogatory term "touchy-feely" to describe employee recognition indicates that they associate showing

appreciation to their employees with being overly open with emotions or affection. They fear that doing so would leave them vulnerable to ridicule ("they'd laugh in my face!).

Of course, I had no way of knowing whether the manager's fears were well-founded or not; the employees were not present to ask. However, several years on, with my review of the existing academic literature on employee recognition finding a similar lack of attention paid to the perspectives of the participants of employee recognition schemes, this conversation became the trigger for this research's focus on employee experiences of recognition. Therefore, selecting a research design which enabled me to delve beneath surface impressions about the meaning of employee recognition and allow multiple voices and perspectives on employee recognition to emerge became a central goal of this research.

The approach subsequently adopted in this research is based on the assumption that human beings do not discover knowledge but actively create or construct it through social interaction (Schwandt 2003). Discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, the Social Constructionist approach taken to this research has had implications for every stage of the research process. The most central of these implications is the belief guiding this research that the concept of employee recognition can be understood only through understanding the meaning of the concept for those who experience it.

In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals drawn from two research organisations, an insurance company and a local council, in order to understand how individuals experience and understand employee recognition within particular social and organisational contexts. To make sense of the co-constructed accounts produced in these interviews, I took an inductive, exploratory (thematic) approach to analysing the data which is consistent with the epistemological assumptions guiding this research and its primary purpose to foreground the meaning that participants give to employee recognition, rather than the meaning given to it by researchers or the views that are expressed in the literature on the subject.

Consistent with the Constructionist approach adopted in this research, I have also engaged in reflexive analysis throughout the research process in an attempt to clarify the impact of my perspective on the research focus and process. The preceding section where I reflected upon my prior experiences of employee recognition, as both a

recipient and giver, and my initial reasons for wanting to study how employee recognition is experienced and understood is the first stage of this process of reflection. In Chapter Four, I more fully describe the reflexive strategies I have employed in an attempt to make visible the practice and construction of knowledge within the research (Pillow 2003). In the next section, I provide a detailed account of the process by which the research questions were developed. Here, and in the chapters which follow, I have used the first person pronoun in order to highlight my active involvement in all stages of the research process, from the selection of the research topic to the analysis of the data.

1.3   Development of research questions

Although my professional experiences as a recipient and giver of recognition inspired my initial interest in researching employee recognition, it was not until I started to review the existing literature on employee recognition that I made the decision to focus on employee experiences.

There is compelling evidence that organisations are increasingly incorporating non-cash recognition into their reward management systems (Long and Shields 2010; Garr 2012; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD] 2013). It was therefore surprising to find that there is a lack of existing academic research focusing on employee recognition, especially when compared with the significant number of available "popular" and practitioner texts promoting employee recognition (for example, Boyle 1995; Gostick and Elton 2009; Hale and Maehling 1992; Knouse 1995; La Motta 1995; Luthans 2000; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999; Pardy 1999; Rose 2001, 2011).

However, in recent years and certainly over the time that I have been writing this thesis, researchers in human resource management, psychology and economics have been slowly starting to pay employee recognition more attention. In economics particularly, there is a small but growing body of literature focusing on employee awards (for example, Bradler, Dur, Neckermann and Non 2013; Chan, Frey, Gallus and Torgler 2013; Kosfeld and Neckermann 2011; Neckermann and Frey 2008; Neckermann, Cueni and Frey 2010; Neckermann and Frey 2013). The main focus of this research has been analysing the impact of employee recognition on behaviour in experimental settings, with studies generally reporting positive effects. The findings

of these studies and those in the fields of human resource management and psychology are discussed fully in Chapter Two.

Whilst the findings of this research in economics suggest that employee recognition can positively affect the behaviour and performance of employees, there are a small but growing number of studies which suggest that employee recognition may carry unintended consequences (for example, Carusetta 2001; Deci 1971; Deci, Koestner and Ryan 1999; Exline, Single, Lobel and Geyer 2004; Gubler, Larkin and Pierce 2013; Henagan 2010; Lepper, Greene and Nisbett 1973; Johnson and Dickinson 2010; Kohn 1993; Mackenzie 2007; Warren and Plumb 1999). In particular, recent research by Feys, Anseel and Wille (2013) has shown that there may be potentially negative side effects of recognition on relationships between award recipients and their co-workers, suggesting that there are social implications to employee recognition which have so far been overlooked by academic researchers. The authors recommend that further research should examine these potential side effects before employee recognition schemes are uncritically adopted by organisations.

Indeed, there is currently very little empirical research examining how recognition schemes actually work in organisations, particularly how they are implemented and managed. Basic questions remain concerning which characteristics of recognition are most important to employees and how recognition should be provided (Bradler et al. 2013; Neckermann and Frey 2013). Overall, as Brun and Dugas (2008) note, the impact that recognition or lack of recognition has on employees and organisations, as well as the obstacles to providing it, has so far received little attention from researchers. They therefore call for future research to examine these issues which limit our understanding of employee recognition. Addressing these knowledge gaps is important for practitioners responsible for designing and implementing employee recognition schemes, as well as for academic researchers seeking to understand the underlying dynamics of employee recognition as a human resource management practice.

My review of the existing literature revealed that researchers have typically taken a quantitative approach to research, resulting in the insider experiences and perspectives of employees being overlooked as a potential source of insight. This thesis aims to contribute to this identified gap by adopting a Social Constructionist approach to

research which foregrounds the voices and perspectives of employees in order to make an empirical contribution to knowledge about employee recognition.

Given the lack of existing research exploring employee recognition from the perspective of the individuals involved, the research has an exploratory purpose to gain access to the subjective interpretations and meanings given to recognition by employees and identify the issues which concern them. As Schutt notes, 'The goal [of exploratory research] is to learn "What is going on here?" and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations' (2012: 14). Consequently, the foundational research question to be addressed by this thesis is necessarily broad:

- How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?

After conducting and transcribing some of the early interviews I conducted at the private sector organisation, I identified an unexpected theme in one of the transcripts. The participant described giving recognition to their colleague as an investment into their working relationship from which they hoped they would eventually benefit themselves, suggesting that the giving of recognition establishes a kind of reciprocal exchange relationship between the two individuals.

Such social exchange in organisations has been studied extensively by researchers, most recently in the field of behavioural economics (see, for example, Akerlof 1982; Charness 2004; Dur and Roelfsema 2010; Fehr, Kirchsteiger and Riedl 1993; Fehr, Gächter and Kirchsteiger 1997; Gneezy and List 2006; Kube, Maréchal and Puppe 2010a). A recent study by Bradler et al. (2013) suggested that the performance improvements they found to occur following the receipt of awards may be due to employees considering the award to be a gift from the employer and feeling obliged to reciprocate, with Frey (2008) also arguing that awards can be used as a way for employers to create a bond with their employees.

However, to my knowledge, no research has so far been conducted which considers how social exchange relationships may be developed through recognition which is given and received as part of a peer-to-peer recognition scheme, between co-workers, rather than solely given by employer to employee. Furthermore, the suggestion that employee recognition could have a social function to establish reciprocal exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace is not accounted for within the

current theoretical perspectives of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory which are typically invoked as the theoretical basis for employee recognition schemes.

Therefore, this finding posed an additional research question and the potential to re-examine the traditional theoretical underpinnings of employee recognition with a view to developing a more nuanced understanding of the social function of employee recognition, distinct from its use as a management tool for reinforcing desired employee behaviours:

- What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?

A consideration of how employee recognition may be re-conceived as a form of gift which fulfils a social function in establishing social exchange relationships between individuals led me to undertake a second literature review, presented in Chapter Three, of the anthropological, sociological and economic literature on gift giving. This represented an exciting opportunity to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on employee recognition by applying theories of gift giving to an area to which they have not previously been applied. Thus, the third research question to be addressed by this thesis was identified as:

- What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

In applying theories of gift giving in the interpretation of employees' accounts of recognition experiences, this thesis seeks to advance understanding of the social function and implications of employee recognition. Furthermore, by re-conceptualising employee recognition as a form of gift which establishes a bond between donor and recipient and signals the donor's intentions about future investment in the relationship, this thesis offers a new theoretical rationale for the use of employee recognition schemes by organisations and participation in the schemes by individual employees.

Having outlined this original theoretical contribution to the study of employee recognition, in the next section, I summarise other potential contributions of this research.

1.4 Empirical and theoretical contributions

As noted above and discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, there is currently a significant body of literature aimed at practitioners which advocates employee recognition as, among other things, a cheaper and more effective alternative to cash (Nelson 1996; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999; Rose 2001, 2011), a tool of leadership (Luthans 2000) and a means of improving performance and productivity (Gostick and Elton 2009). Empirical studies by researchers in economics have also found that recognition can positively affect the behaviour and performance of employees (for example, Bradler et al. 2013; Chan et al. 2013; Kosfeld and Neckermann 2011; Neckermann and Frey 2008; Neckermann et al. 2010; Neckermann and Frey 2013). However, the field of employee recognition remains under-researched by academic researchers and there are significant gaps in our knowledge, particularly around how recognition schemes actually operate in organisations and how they impact on individuals and organisations.

This study seeks to address these gaps in our understanding of employee recognition through presenting empirical evidence collected through in-depth interviews with employees about their experiences of recognition in the workplace. In conducting this research, I have taken a very different approach to the study of employee recognition to those taken by previous researchers who have tended to look at employee recognition programmes from the outside to analyse the impact of employee recognition on behaviour (one notable exception is Long and Shields 2010). Such studies have typically employed quantitative methods to test hypotheses which describe the relationships of interest.

By contrast, this research adopts an insider perspective on employee recognition in an attempt to enhance our understanding of how employee schemes actually operate within organisations by exploring employees' perceptions and experiences of recognition. The research provides an expanded understanding of the features of recognition and issues surrounding it which are most important to employees. It also contributes empirical evidence of the motivating potential of employee recognition, and thus, the practical importance of this area of research.

To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first large qualitative study of employee recognition and is unique in its Social Constructionist approach and focus on exploring

how the meaning of employee recognition is constructed and maintained within particular social and organisational contexts. Thus, this thesis advances existing literature on employee recognition by taking a different methodological approach to those usually applied to the study of employee recognition, providing in-depth interpretations of employees' experiences of recognition in the workplace.

Furthermore, this thesis makes a distinctive empirical contribution to the literature on employee recognition by identifying five main factors which mediate individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace:

1. The social and organisational context, including the organisational culture
2. The recognition scheme design
3. The way the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation, particularly by line managers
4. The way in which recognition is provided to recipients (for example, privately or publicly)
5. The level of alignment between the recognition scheme design and individuals' personal beliefs about recognition

The identification of these five factors which mediate individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace advances the literature on employee recognition by addressing an identified need for research around how employee recognition schemes actually operate in organisations and the ways in which they impact on individuals (Brun and Dugas 2008). Furthermore, these five mediating factors provide insights into what characteristics of recognition are most important and how recognition should be provided (Bradler et al. 2013; Neckermann and Frey 2013).

Through applying insights from the gift giving literature, and the methodological approach taken in this research, this thesis makes an original empirical and theoretical contribution to the literature on employee recognition by identifying three previously un-researched social functions of employee recognition. These are:

1. To convey information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition
2. To develop and maintain social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace
3. To promote unity and solidarity within the organisation.

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Thus, this thesis extends the existing literature on employee recognition by drawing attention to its functions within the workplace beyond a management tool to reinforce organisationally desirable behaviours.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to knowledge about the communicative function of employee recognition by providing insights into how successful acts of recognition operate and, conversely, the reasons why sometimes acts of recognition fail.

Successful acts of recognition communicate to the recipient that the donor recognises them as an individual, rather than purely for their organisational function. They involve both the donor and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other, the donor seeking to accurately predict the type of recognition which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the amount of effort and thought the donor put into delivering the recognition in a way that is meaningful to the recipient.

However, acts of recognition are unsuccessful if the donor is unable or unwilling to identify with the recipient as an individual and accurately predict how they would like to be recognised and/or if the recipient is unable to empathise with the donor in making their choices about how to deliver the recognition. As a result, the recognition fails to persuade the recipient that the donor recognises them personally as an individual. The findings of this thesis further emphasise the importance of trust for recognition to successfully signal the information intended by the donor. Where levels of organisational trust are low, there is a strong possibility that the recipient will interpret the recognition in a way unintended by the donor.

A further way in which this thesis contributes to knowledge is by offering insights into both positive social implications and dysfunctional consequences of employee recognition. One such positive social implication of employee recognition suggested by the findings at both organisations is the creation of social connections between individuals which may be used to access information, resources, support and influence.

However, this thesis also draws attention to the potential dysfunctional consequences of employee recognition in situations where individuals perceive such external acknowledgement and recognition of their contributions to conflict with their intrinsic motivation to perform their job, or are concerned that their achievements may pose a

threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their interpersonal relationships. This research finds that, in such situations, employees may experience feelings of discomfort, including embarrassment and guilt, and respond through attempting to re-define their individual successes as collective achievements and/or demonstrating sympathy for individuals who they have outperformed.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the influence of organisational culture on individuals' susceptibility to such outperformance distress, with individuals who feel a high level of solidarity with other employees being more likely to experience feelings of discomfort when their superior performance is highlighted through a receiving a public recognition award.

1.5   Thesis structure

This thesis is made up of seven chapters. This introductory chapter, **Chapter One**, provides an overview of the development of this thesis. It outlines the professional experiences which contributed to my interest in studying employees' accounts of recognition experiences and the research process through which the research questions to be addressed by this thesis were developed, highlighting the study's potential empirical and theoretical contributions to knowledge about employee recognition.

Chapter Two provides a review of the existing body of literature on employee recognition schemes, bringing together the academic research on employee recognition with the practitioner and "popular" literature on the subject. It starts by briefly considering the role recognition plays in broader society, before exploring what is meant by "employee recognition" when it is used by practitioners and academic researchers. I then briefly outline the theoretical approaches which have informed current understandings of employee recognition, focusing particularly on needs-based theories of motivation and basic reinforcement theory. Finally, I discuss the existing academic research on employee recognition, including a growing body of literature from economics focusing on symbolic awards in the workplace. I engage with research which criticises the use of recognition and other extrinsic rewards and warns of potential dysfunctional consequences for both individual motivation and relationships in the workplace.

As described earlier in this chapter, an unexpected finding in one of the transcripts of an early interview with an employee at the private sector organisation led me to re-

focus this research on the social function and implications of employee recognition. Since the social function of recognition is not fully accounted for by the current theoretical perspectives of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory, I conducted a second literature review of the anthropological, sociological and economic literature on gift giving. **Chapter Three** provides a review of this literature and outlines the ways in which it helps to illuminate my own examination of employee recognition. As a result of this review, I decided to apply theories of gift giving in my interpretation of employees' accounts of recognition experiences in an attempt to advance understanding of the social function and implications of employee recognition.

Chapter Four outlines the philosophical beliefs which guide the research, the rationale for the methodological choices shaping this thesis, and provides a detailed account of the research process.

The research findings are presented and discussed in **Chapters Five** and **Six. Chapter Five** presents and discusses my interpretations of the interviews conducted with employees at the insurance company, and my interpretations of the interviews conducted with employees at the local council are presented and discussed in **Chapter Six**. Each of the two chapters begin with an introduction designed to orient the reader to the main findings and how they are organised within the chapter. Each of the main themes is then sequentially described, along with quotes and examples, and considered in relation to the existing literature. In a brief conclusion to each chapter, I reflect on how the present research contributes to our understanding of employee recognition.

The final chapter, **Chapter Seven**, concludes my account of the research process and findings of this PhD study. I reflect on the research questions and how this thesis has contributed to knowledge about and theory on employee recognition. Finally, consideration is given to practical implications of the findings for human resource practitioners and organisations, before considering limitations of the thesis and concluding by identifying areas for future research.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature on Employee Recognition

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the small but growing existing body of literature on employee recognition schemes, bringing together the relatively little academic research on employee recognition with the significant amounts of available practitioner and "popular" literature on the subject. Although the main focus of this thesis is recognition in an organisational context, I begin this chapter by briefly considering the role recognition plays in broader society. I draw upon the work of sociologist Joel Best (2011) who argues that there is a widespread trend towards the proliferation of awards, prizes and other honours in contemporary society which serves both individual and social ends.

In the next section, I narrow my focus to literature examining recognition which is given and received in an organisational setting. I start by exploring what is meant by "employee recognition" when it is used by practitioners and academic researchers, and how this differs from the related concepts of "incentive" and "reward". I then briefly outline the theoretical approaches which have informed current understandings of employee recognition, focusing particularly on needs-based theories of motivation and basic reinforcement theory.

In the final section of this chapter, I turn to discuss the existing academic research on employee recognition, including a growing body of literature from economics focusing on symbolic awards in the workplace. I engage with research which criticises the use of recognition and other extrinsic rewards and warns of potential dysfunctional consequences for both individual motivation and relationships in the workplace. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the main insights and questions generated by this review.

2.2 The proliferation of awards

Over the past century and particularly over recent decades, commentators have noted a general increase in the number of awards, prizes and honours presented in fields such as science (see Zuckermann 1992), literature and the arts (see English 2005; Best 2011) and education (see Best 2011). According to sociologist Joel Best (2011), this process of prize proliferation can be partly explained by the benefits of award giving,

not just for the award recipients, but also for award givers and audiences. In addition to recognising exceptional performance and inspiring others, award givers may hope to gain prestige, influence or visibility as a result of their association with the award and its recipient. For the recipients, awards symbolise the esteem of others. They may receive a trophy, medal, plaque or other material reward but these are 'merely symbols that some award giver has in fact chosen the recipient for the award' (Best 2011: 39). Recipients may also find that they continue to derive benefits from their award even after the prize has been awarded. For example, an Oscar-winning actor may be offered future roles and opportunities, resulting in increased subsequent income (Nelson, Donihue, Waldman and Wheaton 2001), and more people might be encouraged by the award to go to see the film, helping it to achieve commercial success (Best 2011). Even the audiences watching the recipients receive their awards benefit from award giving since the award ceremony 'affirms and embodies the group's values and thereby serves as a reaffirmation of its worth and solidarity' (Best 2011: 43).

In light of the benefits of award giving for award recipients, award givers and audiences, as well as for other interested parties (including, but not limited to, film producers and the companies supplying the awards), it is unsurprising that those seeking to create new awards tend not to encounter much opposition. Indeed, Best observes, 'contemporary society seems filled with status- and we're continually manufacturing more' (2011: 142). For some, this is desirable since an abundance of status in society is considered to serve positive social ends. According to this view, low levels of self-esteem are an important contributing factor to many social problems (Smelser 1989). Giving out more awards and prizes is viewed as a way of providing more social esteem which, in turn, improves self-esteem (Best 2011).

Status affluence also has its critics, however. Some warn that awarding prizes for accomplishments which are less than exceptional will result in declining standards and disappointment in the long-term (Kohn 1993; Best 2011). For others, prizes, awards and other forms of status are 'simply an illusion, a sop, a way that elites trick ordinary folk into thinking that their lives are going well' (Best 2011: 151). These critics argue that status affluence is essentially anti-social since it encourages individuals to compete against each other for what are ultimately meaningless accolades, promoting individualism at the expense of communal solidarity (Best 2011).

However, according to Best, in focusing on how status affluence affects individuals, such approaches have ignored its social significance. He argues that most of lives are spent within small social worlds (families, groups of friends, schools, workplaces etc.) which each allocate status to its members. This allocation of status provides structure to people's lives and helps them to establish their place within that social world. In singling out individuals for recognition, the social world reveals what is valued and appreciated within that social world. Therefore, Best argues, far from being meaningless, status is a key way of providing meaning, of showing individuals that their social worlds make sense and have value.

He also rejects the suggestion that status affluence promotes individual achievements at the expense of community, maintaining that status is produced *by* social worlds for the benefit of *all* of the members of that social world, not just those who are singled out for recognition. Awards provide a degree of status, not just to those individual winners, but indirectly to all of the members of the social world who view the awards as confirmation of the meaningfulness of the social world which they inhabit. For example, the family and friends of a decorated soldier take pride in his accomplishments, as do other members of his troop and even some members of his country. For Best, it is this need to find meaning in our social lives which explains the trend towards the proliferation of awards in contemporary society.

Offering a historical perspective on the growing importance of recognition in modern society, Taylor argues that there are two main changes which together made our preoccupation with recognition inevitable: the decline of hierarchical society and the development of a new ideal of 'being true to myself and my own particular way of being', that which Taylor calls "authenticity" (1992: 28). In earlier societies, what people recognised as important to themselves (what we would now call identity) was largely determined by one's position on the social hierarchy, and the roles and activities related to this position (Taylor 1992). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, this socially derived identification was challenged by the emergence of a new ideal of authenticity which calls on individuals to discover their own way of being, an individual identity 'that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself' (Taylor 1992: 28). Consequently, individuals are forced to find their own anchor points and personal meanings to guide their lives (Brun and Dugas 2008).

For many individuals, work plays an important role in self-identity construction and in the fulfilment of a range of individual needs (Morse and Weiss 1955), therefore their need for recognition tends to be much higher in this sphere of their lives (Brun 1999, cited in Brun and Dugas 2008: 718). An analysis of survey data from 1946, 1986 and 1992 by Wiley (1997) found that, although the importance of other factors fluctuated, the need for recognition and appreciation remained high throughout these years, usually rated the second most motivating factor by employees.

There is evidence that organisations are responding to the needs of their employees for recognition by introducing recognition awards into their reward management systems (Long and Shields 2010; Garr 2012). In a survey of 573 US organisations, Garr (2012) found that 75% had a recognition scheme. Data collected by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) suggests that recognition awards are also growing in popularity in the UK. In 2013, 35.3% of organisations who participated in their annual reward survey used individual non-monetary recognition awards (CIPD 2013), compared with 31% of organisations surveyed in 2009 (CIPD 2009). The public sector has seen the most significant increase with 37.2% using recognition awards in 2013 (CIPD 2013), compared with just 17.2% in 2011 (CIPD 2011).

2.3   Employee recognition background and definitions

A review of the diverse literatures dealing with employee recognition reveals it to be of central importance for both organisations and individuals alike. Although the concept of employee recognition has received the most attention from motivation theorists (for example, Hertzberg 1966; Maslow 1943), the importance of employee recognition has been acknowledged by writers on topics including identity (for example, Brown, Kirpal and Rauner 2007), employee engagement (for example, Armstrong 2010), total reward (for example, Manus and Graham 2003), total quality management (for example, Hale and Maehling 1992; Knouse 1995; La Motta 1995), organisational health (for example, Browne 2000; Grawitch, Gottschalk and Munz 2006) and social capital (for example, Baker and Dutton 2007). There is also an extensive body of practitioner literature which advocates non-cash employee recognition as a cheaper and more effective alternative to cash (for example, Nelson 1996; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999; Rose 2001, 2011), a tool of leadership (for

example, Luthans 2000), a means of improving performance and productivity (for example, Gostick and Elton 2009), enhancing quality (for example, Hale and Maehling 1992; Knouse 1995; La Motta 1995), improving health and safety compliance (for example, Pardy 1999) and reducing absenteeism (for example, Boyle 1995).

However, despite such widespread acceptance of the importance of employee recognition for both individuals and organisations and evidence of its increasing use in organisations, employee recognition has received relatively little focused attention from academic researchers. The lack of academic research targeted at employee recognition is particularly marked when compared with the vast amounts of available practitioner literature advocating recognition schemes. Several authors suggest that a major barrier to academic research is the lack of a conceptual framework around which research on employee recognition can be framed (Brun and Dugas 2008; Davidson 1999; Long and Shields 2010; Markham, Scott and McKee 2002; Neckermann et al. 2010). Indeed, when practitioners discuss recognition schemes, they refer to a variety of interventions which can range from a spontaneous and private "thank you for doing a good job" to organisation-wide formal programmes, leading academics to consider employee recognition 'an ambiguous concept with little theoretical basis' (Neckermann et al. 2010: 2).

In a paper seeking to help academics achieve a clearer understanding of the concept of employee recognition and therefore motivate future research, Brun and Dugas propose the following definition:

> Recognition is first and foremost a constructive response; it is also a judgement made about a person's contribution, reflecting not just work performance but also personal dedication and engagement. Lastly, recognition is engaged in on a regular or ad hoc basis, and expressed formally or informally, individually or collectively, privately or publicly, and monetarily or non-monetarily.
>
> (Brun and Dugas 2008: 727).

The authors propose a model of four employee recognition practices which exist within organisations: a) personal or existential recognition b) recognition of work practices c) recognition of job dedication and d) recognition of results. These four

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recognition practices are designed to fulfil a variety of employee needs: to be recognised and valued as a person 'as a dignified, equal, free, and unique being who has needs' but also appreciated as a worker for the quality of their contribution, their commitment to and engagement with their work and the results they produce (Brun and Dugas 2008: 727). These practices may be expressed through five types of interaction at an organisational (organisation-led), vertical (between manager and employee), horizontal (between peers), external (between clients, suppliers and consultants and employees) and social (between company or employee and community) level.

Practitioners also provide further useful definitions of employee recognition, including UK reward management consultant Michael Rose who defines recognition as:

> A process of acknowledging or giving special attention to a high level of accomplishment or performance, such as customer care or support to colleagues, which is not dependent on achievement against a given target or objective. It can be day to day, informal or formal.

<div align="right">(Rose 2011: 1)</div>

Within the practitioner literature, a key distinction is made between "recognition" and "incentives" (Hansen, Smith and Hansen 2002; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999; Rose 2001; 2011; Silverman 2004). Rose defines an incentive as a 'material tangible reward that is earned through achieving specific defined aims or objectives that are known in advance' (2011: 1). For example, a parent might offer a treat to a child for tidying their room. The child tidies the room *in order to* obtain the treat. By contrast, recognition is not offered in advance but retrospectively given in special acknowledgement of an accomplishment or standard of performance, as when a parent rewards a child with a treat for good behaviour.

This distinction is similar to that made by US reward management writer Jerry McAdams (1999) between "performance improvement plans" and "recognition plans". Performance improvement plans (or incentives) are 'formula-driven and specify both performance expectations/targets/goals and potential reward outcomes *in advance* of actual performance' whereas recognition plans are '*retrospective* and usually discretionary in nature' (Shields 2006: 3, my italics). Recognition plans are used to 'honour outstanding performance after the fact and are designed for awareness,

role modelling and retention of recipients' (McAdams 1999: 242). Such plans 'typically seek to recognise behaviours that fulfil overall values but are difficult, if not impossible, to record in terms of objectives- even if it were desirable to do so' (Rose 2001: 37). Examples might include 'excellent customer service', 'something above and beyond the norm', 'innovation, improvements, suggestions' and 'team work' (Rose 2011: 32).

Although employee recognition is often characterised as 'non-financial' or 'non-monetary', as Silverman notes, this 'does not necessarily mean that the recognition provided should have no financial value, it simply means that whatever is given, it should not be just money' (2004: 3). Many so-called "non-financial" or "non-monetary" employee recognition awards, including merchandise and travel vouchers, have a financial value, a symbolic value (providing employees with a sense that their contributions are appreciated by the organisation) and an informational value (providing them with feedback on their performance) (Long and Shields 2010). This is consistent with Brun and Dugas who observe that, for the recipient, 'recognition represents a reward experienced primarily at the symbolic level, but may also take on emotional, practical or financial value' (2008: 728).

In order to alleviate confusion, previous academic researchers such as Shields (2006) and Long and Shields (2010) and practitioners such as Rose (2011) have preferred to use the term "non-cash recognition". This term encompasses tangible and non-tangible rewards of varying economic value, including vouchers and gift cards (which are close to cash but which place a limit on where the recipient can spend them). It also includes the five forms of non-cash award identified by McAdams (1999): social reinforcers (such as praise from the manager in the morning team meeting), merchandise awards, travel awards, symbolic awards (for example, certificates and trophies) and earned time off.

As previously noted, there are a number of prominent reward management writers who advocate non-cash recognition as a more flexible and effective alternative to cash for recognising and rewarding performance (e.g. Bob Nelson, Jerry McAdams, Michael Rose). They claim that non-cash recognition provides instant reinforcement and clear exemplars of organisationally desirable behaviours and results (Shields 2006), and increases the flexibility and spontaneity of the reward system (McAdams 1999).

Indeed, Nelson argues that organisations should 'dump the cash' and 'load on the praise', suggesting that non-cash recognition should substitute for cash-based reward (1996: 68).

Rose (2011) outlines four further reasons why non-cash rewards are more effective than cash. Firstly, non-cash rewards differentiate recognition from pay. This is important since the psychological concept of separability states that people mentally separate different sources and uses of funds, and aggregate others (Jeffrey and Shaffer 2007; Thaler 1999). Since they lack separability, it is likely that cash rewards will be mentally combined with the rest of the employee's salary, making them subject to the value-reducing effects of diminishing marginal utility (Jeffrey and Shaffer 2007). Furthermore, Nelson (1996) and McAdams (1995) argue that organisations' past reliance on financial incentives has resulted in them being taken for granted or perceived as entitlements by much of the workforce. Non-cash recognition, by comparison, is clearly something separate and extra to pay so there is little chance of it coming to be expected by employees.

Secondly, non-cash rewards can have a 'memory value' (Rose 2011: 9). Non-cash rewards such as a flat-screen television or piece of furniture can act as continual visual reminders of the good performance which led to their receipt. The memory of that achievement lasts a lot longer than a cash bonus which is barely remembered two years later (McAdams 1995). There is also a social acceptability in discussing a non-cash reward that does not exist with cash rewards, bringing additional social reinforcement from others knowing about the achievement (Jeffrey and Shaffer 2007).

Thirdly, the perceived value of a non-cash reward can be significantly higher than the actual cost to the organisation, meaning that a non-cash reward may have a higher value to the employee than cash to the same value. This may be due to the ability of the organisation to procure a reward more cheaply than an employee could, or the organisation may use their own products or services. For example, a car dealership could loan one of their own sports cars to an employee for a month or a hotel group could give away a weekend stay for an employee and a guest.

The fourth reason why non-cash can be more effective than cash is that non-cash rewards can be more personal to the interests and needs of the particular recipient. A well-chosen non-cash reward can demonstrate a greater degree of thought than a

simple cash sum would communicate which can lead to it being valued more highly by the recipient than they would value the same amount in cash.

2.4 Existing theoretical foundation

Previous work on employee recognition has tended to draw upon a combination of needs-based motivation theories and basic reinforcement theory as a theoretical foundation for the effects of employee recognition. In the following section, I briefly outline each of these approaches.

2.4.1 Needs-based motivation theories

Needs-based motivation theorists argue that individuals have basic drives which motivate them to behave in ways which enable them to fulfil those needs. One of the most well-known theories of motivation, Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of human needs identifies five categories of needs: physiological (the need for food, warmth, shelter and clothing), safety (the need for physical and mental security and order), belongingness and love (the need for social acceptance and affection), esteem (the need for recognition by others and belief in one's self) and self-actualisation (the need to become what one is capable of becoming, to achieve one's potential). The classes of needs are arranged on the hierarchy in order of their potency for influencing behaviour. According to Maslow, individuals are never fully satisfied on any need level but once a class of needs is substantially met, it is no longer motivating for the individual. Human behaviour is therefore presented as a rational activity directed at the satisfaction of successive levels of needs.

Recognition schemes are directed at the satisfaction of the esteem needs which can be broken down further into the need for self-esteem and the need for the esteem of others. The need for the esteem of others is required to be satisfied externally through status or prestige, recognition and appreciation by others. The need for self-esteem is understood as the need to hold a high evaluation of oneself which is based upon real capacity, achievement, independence and respect from others. The satisfaction of both types of esteem needs can be seen as requiring the external acknowledgement of an individual's worth and recognition of their achievements by others in the organisation.

Several theorists have attempted to reformulate Maslow's theory since, most notably Frederick Hertzberg who proposed his (1966) dual-level needs theory as an alternative

to Maslow's five-level hierarchy. Hertzberg interviewed several hundred US professional engineers and accountants, asking them to list work experiences that made them feel "exceptionally good" about their jobs, as well as those which made them feel "exceptionally bad" about their jobs. After categorising the responses, Herzberg found that the factors which caused negative feelings were quite distinct from those which caused positive feelings. Respondents who felt good about their work cited factors which largely correspond with Maslow's higher-order needs, including achievement, recognition for achievement, the work itself, responsibility and growth or advancement. On the other hand, dissatisfied respondents tended to cite factors extrinsic to the job such as pay, working conditions, supervision, security, relationships with colleagues and company policies which, on the whole, correspond to Maslow's physiological and safety needs.

Herzberg's findings led him to conclude that there exist two different continua: one set of 'hygiene' factors which make up a continuum ranging from dissatisfaction to no dissatisfaction and a second set of 'motivator' factors which make up a continuum ranging from no satisfaction to satisfaction (Hertzberg 1966: 71-91). The first set of factors described as hygiene factors (those factors extrinsic to the job) do not motivate or satisfy; their purpose is primarily to prevent job dissatisfaction. The second set of factors are those intrinsic to the job, described by Hertzberg as motivators, which determine job satisfaction and are 'effective in motivating the individual to superior performance and effort' (Hertzberg 1966: 89). Recognition, according to Herzberg, is a motivator whilst monetary rewards such as pay are necessary to prevent dissatisfaction but do not serve to promote job satisfaction and motivation. Indeed, Hertzberg's presentation of pay as a hygiene factor is often used by exponents of employee recognition as evidence of the motivational benefits of recognition over monetary rewards (Nelson 1996; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999).

2.4.2   Reinforcement theory

Reinforcement theory has its roots in the work of behavioural psychologists John Watson, Ivan Pavlov, E.L. Thorndike and B.F. Skinner. It holds that people can be conditioned through rewards and punishments to repeat behaviours which are rewarded and to cease behaviours which are not. Through this process of conditioning, an association is made between a behaviour and the consequence for that behaviour.

The theory is based on Thorndike's (1911) "law of effect" which states that behaviour that results in a pleasurable outcome is likely to be repeated. Reinforcement is the process of increasing the frequency or strength of behaviours using reinforcing consequences. By contrast, punishment is the process by which the strength or frequency is decreased using punishing consequences. A reinforcer is a consequence that increases the frequency of the preceding behaviour. There are natural reinforcers such as the ability to read as reinforcement for learning to read, or contrived reinforcers such as money, treats or other rewards (Flora 2004).

Reinforcement can be both positive and negative but both increase the preceding behaviour. Positive reinforcement occurs when something positive is presented as a consequence of behaviour and the behaviour increases. For example, if playing the piano reveals a melody and brings enjoyment, and if the frequency by which the individual plays the piano increases to reveal more melodies and brings more enjoyment, then playing the piano has been positively reinforced by the melodies and by the enjoyment produced by playing. Negative reinforcement occurs when the frequency or strength of a behaviour increases because something negative is removed or prevented from occurring. The behaviour of brushing teeth twice daily is negatively reinforced if it prevents or terminates toothache.

Although most widely used as a method of modifying the behaviour of children, reinforcement theory has also been applied in an organisational setting. An elaborate form of reinforcement theory, organisational behaviour modification (O.B. Mod.) theory (Bandura 1969, 1986; Luthans and Stajkovic 1999; Stajkovic and Luthans 1997) is concerned with modifying employee behaviour on the job through the systematic application of contrived reinforcement interventions. The central tenet of O.B. Mod. approaches is 'you get what you reinforce' (Luthans and Stajkovic 1999: 52). Rewards are distinguished from reinforcers: the former is something valuable given for special behaviour whereas a reinforcer is only such if it increases the rate and strength of the preceding behaviour. Therefore, not all rewards are reinforcers but all reinforcers are rewards.

According to Stajkovic and Luthans (1997), there are three types of positive reinforcers that result in an increase in performance-related behaviours when contingently administered: pay, performance feedback and social recognition. Social

recognition is defined as 'the use of verbal consequences, typically expressed by individuals, such as attention, recognition, commendations, compliments, and praise' (Stajkovic and Luthans 1997: 1134). Therefore, reinforcement theory provides a theoretical basis for the positive effect of recognition employee performance by demonstrating that, if individuals are recognised or rewarded for their performance, they will be motivated to keep performing the activities for which they have been recognised.

On the face of it, reinforcement theory and needs-based motivation theories make an 'uneasy' pairing as the two are based on contrasting assumptions about human behaviour (Shields 2006: 6). Motivation theories seek understanding of human behaviour by looking inside the individual; human behaviour is seen as the product of inner tensions or needs which drive the individual to seek fulfilment or satisfaction. By contrast, reinforcement theory looks to the external environment; human behaviour is understood as a function of contingent consequences. However, as Leavitt and Bahrami (1988) argue, despite these differences, exponents of needs-based motivation theories and those committed to reinforcement depend on one another to defend their respective positions. The process of reinforcement involves offering a reward for desired behaviour but in order for the reward to be a reward it must be wanted or needed by the would-be recipient. In other words, some kind of motivation (needs, desires) are required for the reward to successfully reinforce the behaviour. On the other hand, motivation theorists need reinforcement to account for the learning and development of new motives, to explain why the things which motivate a person as a child are not the same things which motivate them as an adult. Therefore, the two theories combined offer a more comprehensive account of human behaviour.

2.5   Existing research on employee recognition

As previously discussed, a barrier to academic research on employee recognition has been the lack of clarity around what constitutes employee recognition from an academic perspective. As a result, academics have preferred to focus on individual elements such as money, praise and feedback separately (Neckermann et al. 2010). However, in recent years, researchers in human resource management, psychology and economics have been slowly starting to pay employee recognition more attention.

Prominent in this emergent body of literature are Long and Shields (2010) for their exploratory research into employee recognition as a human resource management practice. Long and Shields surveyed 349 Australian and Canadian organisations to determine whether non-cash recognition acts as a substitute for or complement to cash-based reward practices, and identify factors which may predict the adoption of non-cash recognition schemes. Their results indicate that non-cash recognition schemes are widely used by Western organisations to recognise both individuals and groups of employees but, contrary to the suggestion of some non-cash recognition advocates (e.g. Nelson), they do not substitute for cash-based reward. Instead, the authors found a number of significant positive relationships between non-cash recognition and cash-based reward practices, suggesting that most organisations believed that it was useful to have both non-cash recognition and cash-based reward elements in their total reward management system. Finally, the most significant predictor of non-cash recognition scheme adoption was unionisation, with a negative relationship being found between union presence and the presence of non-cash recognition. Since unions are generally opposed to individual-based performance pay schemes due to the threat they pose to member solidarity, it was expected that they would be wary of individual-based non-cash recognition schemes for the same reason (Long and Shields 2010).

However, the major focus of existing research on employee recognition has been analysing its impact on behaviour. Indeed, researchers in the field of organisational behaviour modification have been analysing the effect on performance of contingently administered money, feedback and social recognition for over three decades (Stajkovic and Luthans 2003). A meta-analysis conducted by Stajkovic and Luthans (2003) of 72 of these studies concluded that the use of social recognition programmes increased employee performance by an average of 17%, money by 23% and feedback by 10%. Although this does seem to suggest that money is more effective than non-cash recognition, as Long and Shields (2010) note, this analysis does not take into account the relative cost of each approach in delivering performance benefits. Once the costs are incorporated, non-cash recognition may well represent a better return on investment than money.

The standard economic explanation for the above evidence of the effectiveness of social recognition is that social recognition sends a message to the employee about which behaviours will generate future material benefits such as pay rises or

promotions (Bandura 1986; Holmström 1999). Since further material rewards often occur in conjunction or following the approval of others whilst undesirable consequences tend to follow the disapproval of others, social approval and disapproval act as predictors of future rewards or punishments. This, in turn, strengthens those behaviours which attracted approval and weakens those which attracted disapproval.

Whilst this economic explanation of the value of social recognition as a predictor of future rewards may be accurate for some employees, it fails to consider the possibility that social recognition could be reinforcing in itself. In order to investigate empirically how important the pure recognition value of social recognition is it is necessary to separate social recognition from current and future material benefits. A study by Kosfeld and Neckermann (2011) aimed to do just that, by investigating the effect of purely symbolic awards which offered no material benefit on worker performance. Students were hired to work on a database project for a fixed wage and were randomly assigned to one of two treatments (award or control). In the award treatment, students were offered an award for the best performance. The purely symbolic award consisted of a personalised congratulations card signed by the managing director of the organisation. In the control treatment, the students were not offered an award. The results showed that the symbolic awards increased performance by 12% on average. This suggests that status and social recognition can be strong motivators for individuals to increase their effort in the presence of symbolic awards.

Further research which suggests that recognition can have a positive effect on employee behaviour was conducted by Markham, Scott and McKee (2002). The one-year, quasi-experimental field study was conducted at four manufacturing plants with a total of 1,100 employees and compared the effect of a public recognition scheme for improving work attendance with three types of control treatments. All employees with perfect attendance for a month had their names posted with a gold star for that month, and at the end of each quarter, employees with no more than two absences (i.e. with perfect or good attendance records) received a personal card congratulating them. At the end of the year, there was a public plant-wide meeting to recognise those employees with perfect and good attendance. Those employees with perfect attendance received engraved gold necklaces (women) and gold penknives (men), with employees with good attendance receiving the same items in silver. The personal recognition scheme reduced absenteeism by between 29% and 52% across each of the

four quarters, whereas the control treatments produced only insignificant reductions in absenteeism.

In economics, there is a small but growing body of literature focusing on employee awards. Neckermann and Frey describe awards as 'extrinsic, predominantly non-material incentives allocated through an institutionalized recognition program' which can be distinguished from spontaneous feedback and praise by their formal nature (2013: 67). Empirical research has generally found positive effects of awards as incentive instruments. Neckermann and Frey (2008) and Kosfeld and Neckermann (2011) provide convincing evidence of the motivating power of status and social recognition, showing that awards can act as powerful incentives for workers to increase their efforts.

However, research has also shown that awards can influence behaviour *after* they have been received. In a field setting, Neckermann, Cueni and Frey (2010) found that, when unannounced symbolic awards were introduced in a call centre, the performance of award recipients was significantly higher than comparable non-recipients after the award was presented. Similarly, Neckermann and Frey (2013) used a survey experiment to demonstrate that the introduction of a hypothetical award had statistically significant effects on employees' stated willingness to contribute to a public good. A study by Chan, Frey, Gallus and Torgler (2013) comparing the effect of a specific award in economics on recipients' subsequent research activity with that of a control group of non-recipients with similar research performance also found a positive effect on the productivity of recipients after receiving the award. Bradler, Dur, Neckermann and Non (2013) found that formal recognition in the form of a thank you card improved subsequent performance significantly, especially when provided only to the best performers. Surprisingly, subjects who did not receive the recognition were mainly responsible for the performance increase.

Various explanations have been suggested for why symbolic awards which carry no monetary value and limited current or future benefits increase positive behaviour such as productivity and contribution to a public good and decrease negative behaviour such as absenteeism. Neckermann et al. (2010) argue that the performance improvements they observed after the awards were received were driven by image concerns and the desire to live up to the honour. This explanation is based on the assumption that

employees care about status and what their peers and employers think about them, as well as their own self-image (Bénbou and Tirole 2006; Ellingsen and Johannesson 2007, 2008; Greenberg 1988).

A second possible explanation for performance improvements following the receipt of awards is that the employees consider the award to be a gift from the employer and feel obliged to reciprocate (Akerlof 1982; Charness 2004; Dur and Roelfsema 2010; Fehr et al., 1993; Fehr, Gächter and Kirchsteiger 1997; Gneezy and List 2006; Kube et al. 2010a). Bradler and colleagues suggest that the improvements in the subsequent performance of the award winners in their study arose as a result of award winners increasing their efforts in order to reciprocate for the award. However, the performance improvements they observed were largely produced by improvements in the subsequent performance of those who were not given an award. Therefore, the authors propose that this effect may be driven by the workers' preferences for conformity, with non-recipients increasing their performance when they realise that they performed below average (see Bernheim 1994 for a useful summary of conformity theory).

2.5.1 Criticisms of employee recognition

However, there is evidence that recognition awards might not provide universally positive results and might instead have unintended consequences. Johnson and Dickinson (2010) found that, in a simulated work setting, the employee of the month scheme failed to improve performance over time and, in some cases, the performance of recipients actually fell after the received their award. Another study by Gubler, Larkin and Pierce (2013) found that an awards scheme designed to improve attendance did, on average, reduce tardiness and increase punctuality, however productivity also fell by 1.4% and employees with previously high attendance suffered a 6-8% drop in productivity following the start of the scheme. Gubler et al. suggest that these employees were demotivated by the offer of awards for good behaviour which they already exhibited.

This suggestion is supported by a body of literature which argues that extrinsic rewards undermine or "crowd out" intrinsic motivation (Deci 1971; Deci et al. 1999; Kohn 1993; Lepper et al. 1973). The concern is that rewarding employees for organisationally-desirable behaviours or activities may decrease their intrinsic

motivation to perform the behaviour or activity. Usually, the notion of "crowding out" applies to the behaviour which is being compensated, however, as Gubler et al. note, their findings suggest that offering a reward for one behaviour can lead to "crowding out" of another completely different behaviour. According to the authors, one likely reason for the crowding out of intrinsic motivation may be perceptions of unfairness. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature in the field of organisational justice concerned with employee perceptions of fairness (see Colquitt, Greenberg and Zapata-Phelan 2005 for a comprehensive summary). Research has shown that perceptions of unfairness or dishonesty can motivate employees to "get even" by reducing effort and productivity (Akerlof 1982; Ederer and Fehr 2007) and engaging in other dysfunctional behaviours (see Skarlicki and Folger 1997).

Arguments concerning the detrimental effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation are based on early laboratory experiments conducted by Deci (1971) and Lepper, Greene and Nisbett (1973). In Deci's experiment, college students were asked to work on a puzzle solving task (chosen specifically since it was believed that the students would be intrinsically interested in the puzzle) during three one hour sessions. The students were split into two groups of 12 students: one experimental group and one control group and each asked to complete a series of puzzles. At the second of the three sessions, the experimental group was told that they would receive $1 for each completed puzzle. The control group was not offered any money. No money was offered to either group for the third session. In the middle of each session, the subjects were left alone and told that they could do as they pleased (read the magazines which were provided, look around the room, continue to work on the puzzle etc.). During this free time, the subjects were observed through a one-way window and the amount of time which each individual spent working on the puzzle was recorded. The amount of time spent on the puzzle during free periods was taken as the measure of intrinsic motivation.

The results found that, after the money was introduced to the experimental group in the second session, their motivation increased. The subjects spent longer working on the puzzle in their free time than they had during the first session. The subjects in the control group spent around the same amount of time on the puzzle in their free time during the first and second sessions. When the rewards were removed in the final session, the motivation of the experimental group dropped to a level considerably

lower than in the first session while the amount of time spent by the control group on the puzzle remained about the same. It appeared that the introduction of a reward made the subjects less interested in the task once the rewards were withdrawn or, in other words, that 'money may work to 'buy off' one's intrinsic motivation for an activity' (Deci 1971: 114). Although there were only 24 subjects in the study and the results were of marginal statistical significance, the results of Deci's experiment are often cited in support of the hypotheis that:

> If a person is engaged in some activity for reasons of intrinsic motivation, and if he begins to receive the external reward, money, for performing the activity, the degree to which he is intrinsically motivated to perform the activity decreases.

<div align="right">(Deci 1971: 108)</div>

Whereas Deci's study examined the effects of a monetary reward, Lepper, Greene and Nisbett's (1973) experiment examined the effect of symbolic rewards on intrinsic motivation. A group of nursery school children were given the opportunity to draw with coloured felt-tip pens ("Magic Markers") which were not normally available in the classroom. The children were observed during a free play period to determine their intrinsic interest in the activity of drawing with "Magic Markers" and the children who spent the most amount of time drawing were selected as subjects for the experiment. The subjects were split into three groups: in the expected-award group, subjects agreed to take part in the activity in order to gain a "Good Player" award (a certificate decorated with a red ribbon and gold star); in the unexpected-award group, subjects received the award but were not promised it in advance; and in the no-award group, subjects were not promised and did not receive an award. The subjects who were promised an award in advance (the expected-award group) spent considerably less time drawing than the other two groups and also less time than they themselves had in the first (pre-experimental) session before the reward was offered. Both the unexpected-award group and the no-award group spent slightly longer on the activity than they had in the pre-experimental session. Lepper and his colleagues concluded that their results suggest that extrinsic rewards should be used with caution:

> Many of the activities we ask children to attempt in school, in fact, are of intrinsic interest to at least some of the children; one effect of presenting

these activities within a system of extrinsic incentives, the present study
suggests, is to undermine the intrinsic interest in these activities of at least
those children who had some interest to begin with.

(Lepper et al. 1973: 136)

One explanation for the detrimental effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation is termed the 'overjustification hypothesis' which states that 'a person's intrinsic interest in an activity may be undermined by inducing him to engage in it as an explicit means to some extrinsic goal' (Lepper et al. 1973: 130). The hypothesis is largely based on attribution (Kelley 1967) and self-perception (Bem 1967) theories which propose that individuals make post-behavioural inferences about the causes of their own behaviour based on the conditions in which it occurred, which then influence future motivation. In the presence of external controls (such as a reward), an individual attributes their behaviour to these external circumstances but if these external controls are not perceived (or if they are psychologically insufficient to account for behaviour), behaviour is attributed to internal motivation. If an individual is rewarded for doing something which they already enjoy doing, they may infer that their behaviour was motivated by the external reward rather than by any intrinsic interest in the activity. Later, when the external reward is removed, the individual conforms to this perception and their interest in the activity decreases. The decline in intrinsic motivation has been termed 'the overjustification effect' because it is thought that by offering a reward for an inherently interesting or pleasurable activity, the individual has too many reasons (justifications) for performing the activity and so discounts the internal explanation for the behaviour, causing a decline in intrinsic motivation (Lepper et al. 1973: 130).

A contrasting explanation is provided by cognitive evaluation theory which is based on the assumption that intrinsic motivation is linked to the innate need of individuals for competence and self-determination (Deci and Ryan 1985). According to Deci and Ryan (1985), events either promote or diminish feelings of competence and self-determination depending on whether they are perceived as informational, controlling or amotivational. Events perceived as informational lead to an increased perceived self-determined competence and more internal perceived locus of causality, enhancing intrinsic motivation. An event which is experienced as controlling prompts an external perceived locus of causality which diminishes the individual's sense of self-

determination and intrinsic motivation. An amotivating event involves negative feedback, indicating a lack of skill which diminishes the perception of competence and intrinsic motivation.

The evidence provided by the studies conducted by Deci (1971) and Lepper, Greene and Nisbett (1973) and the subsequent theoretical explanations offered for the observed decrease in intrinsic motivation provoked understandable concern about the widespread application of incentive systems at home, in schools and in organisations. Since those early studies, a considerable number of further studies have examined the effect of various types of rewards on intrinsic motivation, with contradictory findings. In 1994, Cameron and Pierce conducted a meta-analysis to assess the findings of these experiments and concluded that, overall, rewards do not undermine intrinsic motivation and verbal praise may in fact enhance intrinsic motivation. The results showed that rewards were only detrimental under a narrow set of conditions: when subjects are offered a tangible, expected reward which is offered regardless of performance. A further meta-analysis conducted by Deci, Koestner and Ryan (1999) refuted the findings of Cameron and Pierce (1994), concluding that all tangible, expected rewards reduced free-choice intrinsic motivation.

Despite the contrasting findings of the meta-analyses above, which may be produced by the different labelling and categorisation processes of the included studies by different teams of researchers, both highlight an important distinction present in the intrinsic motivation literature between expected and unexpected rewards. Expected rewards refer to when subjects are offered a reward prior to the experimental session and delivered the reward after the session whereas unexpected rewards refer to rewards which have not been promised in advance (Cameron and Pierce 1994). Since it is not promised in advance and instead is given after the fact, employee recognition should be referred to as a form of unexpected reward. Rewards may be also categorised as tangible (e.g. money, certificates, trophies) or verbal (praise, approval, positive feedback) (Cameron, Banko and Pierce 2001). Employee recognition may take either a tangible or verbal form and, often, involves both simultaneously. Reward contingency may also influence the effect of the reward on intrinsic motivation: sometimes rewards may be offered simply for taking part in an activity or made contingent on some level of performance or on completing or solving a task (Cameron et al. 2001). Employee recognition is contingent in the sense that it refers to a high

level of accomplishment or standard of performance, and is not given to everyone unconditionally, but, crucially, these levels or standards are not specified in advance.

For critics of reinforcement, the distinction between expected and unexpected rewards is especially important. Alfie Kohn (1993) criticises the widespread educational, parental and organisational practice of taking 'what people want or need and offer[ing] it on a contingent basis in order to control how they act' (1993: 4). He describes the behaviourist assumptions behind this "Do this and you'll get that" principle as 'dehumanizing' since humans are presented as passive beings whose behaviour is wholly dependent on, and controlled by, reinforcements (1993: 25). Indeed, Skinner rejected the notion of humans as originating agents, instead arguing that 'a self or personality is at best a repertoire of behaviour imparted by an organized set of contingencies' (1974: 164). Kohn argues that everyday practices of promising rewards to children for good behaviour, to students for making an effort to learn or to employees for high levels of performance all share the behaviourist assumption that humans do not have the capacity to independently choose to act in this way in the absence of incentives (1993: 26).

Thus, the focus of Kohn's concern is primarily rewards which are expected or promised in advance contingent on the performance of a certain behaviour or specified standard of performance ('Do this and you'll get that'). He states that 'unexpected rewards are much less destructive than the rewards people are told about beforehand and are deliberately trying to obtain' (1993: 53). Indeed, both the meta-analyses by Cameron and Pierce (1994) and Deci et al. (1999) concluded that tangible rewards have no effect on intrinsic motivation when delivered unexpectedly. This finding is in line with cognitive evaluation theory as, since the cognitive evaluation process is thought to occur while the rewarded activity is being performed, an unexpected reward would not affect the individual's intrinsic motivation (Cameron and Pierce 1994). Intrinsic motivation was not affected because the subjects were not performing the activity in order to gain the reward and therefore did not feel controlled by the reward (Deci et al. 1999). Similarly, according to the "overjustification hypothesis" (Lepper et al. 1973), intrinsic interest is not anticipated to be affected by unexpected rewards since, in the absence of external controls, the individual is expected to attribute their behaviour to internal motivation.

Both meta-analyses also concluded that verbal rewards (such as positive feedback or praise) may have an enhancing effect on intrinsic motivation (Cameron and Pierce 1994; Deci et al. 1999). In part, this is thought to be due to verbal rewards typically being unexpected. Although it is more difficult to conceive of a natural setting where verbal rewards would be expected, it is anticipated that expected verbal rewards would prompt the individual to perceive an external locus of causality, diminishing the individual's sense of self-determination and intrinsic motivation (Deci et al. 1999). However, the increase in intrinsic motivation is primarily explained by cognitive evaluation theory as a result of the informational value of verbal rewards enhancing the perception of competence (Deci et al. 1999)

Furthermore, Deci et al. (1999) found that the method of administering verbal rewards can moderate their effect on intrinsic motivation. Feedback which is experienced as controlling counteracts the positive informational value of the reward, leading to decreased intrinsic motivation as a result of the feedback (Kast and Connor, 1988, Pittman et al., 1980, Ryan et al., 1983 cited in Deci et al. 1999: 657). Kohn also distinguishes between 'on the one hand, straightforward information about how well someone has done at a task, and encouragement that leaves the recipient feeling a sense of self-determination' and 'verbal rewards that feel controlling, make one dependent on someone else's approval' (1993: 96). Unfortunately, as Kohn notes, whilst care can be taken to avoid verbal rewards which are unmistakably manipulative or insincere, verbal rewards of a more ambiguous sort may be interpreted differently depending on the context in which they are given and received.

Kohn argues that precisely because verbal rewards such as praise involve one individual making a value judgement about the behaviour or performance of another, praise may be interpreted by the recipient as an attempt by the giver to gain or maintain power. If a high-status individual is praised by someone of lower status, this may be seen as presumptuous or insulting. A manager praising the work of an employee may be perceived by the employee as a reminder of the higher status of the manager, whilst a colleague praising another colleague may be interpreted as an attempt to occupy a position of greater power over the other.

These examples serve as a reminder that at the root of the practice of offering rewards is an intent to control. Rewards are 'typically used to induce or pressure people to do

things they would not freely do' (Deci and Ryan 1987: 1026) or, as Kohn argues, 'rather, things that the controller believes they would not freely do' (1993: 26). If one individual controls another by deciding what needs to be done by the other in order for the reward to be received, it follows that the two individuals are of unequal status. Therefore, Kohn argues that rewards do not just reflect power differences but also contribute to the power imbalance since their use usually works to the advantage of the reward giver rather than the reward recipient.

According to Kohn, through highlighting power disparities, rewards have adverse effects on relationships between the individuals giving the rewards and those receiving them. In an organisational context, the perception that the manager controls the distribution of rewards creates the feeling of being evaluated rather than supported. By forcing employees into a position of dependency on their manager for their rewards, Kohn argues that employees are more likely to conceal problems, overstate their capabilities and focus on impressing or flattering the person who controls the rewards, thus potentially undermining the intended performance improvements of the rewards.

In addition to having negative effects on the relationship between manager and employee, Kohn also considers rewards to be detrimental to the development and maintenance of positive relationships between co-workers which benefit team work and the sharing of knowledge. He argues that by explicitly pitting employees against one another in pursuit of a scarce reward, the message conveyed to employees is that their co-workers are a barrier to their own success. Consequently, employees are disinclined to help others with their work and instead are more likely to perceive their co-workers as rivals to be defeated.

Lending further weight to Kohn's warnings about the potential negative side effects of rewards on relationships in the workplace are the findings of several studies on recipients of teaching awards which revealed award winners who experienced hostility or resentment from co-workers upon receiving recognition (Carusetta 2001; Mackenzie 2007; Warren and Plumb 1999). In a study of award-winning estate agents, Henagan (2010) found that award recipients experienced feelings of guilt at having been recognised and feared negative reactions from their co-workers. This finding is in line with research on social comparison which has found that individuals often

experience feelings of discomfort or a sense of guilt as a result of outperforming others (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004; Rodriguez Mosquera, Parrott and Mendoza 2010). A further study by White, Sanbonmatsu, Croyle and Smittipatana (2002) found that some outperformers deliberately reduced their subsequent efforts in order to maintain their interpersonal relationships.

Interested in exploring these potential negative effects of recognition further, Feys et al. (2013) investigated the impact of co-workers receiving recognition on their participants' emotions and behavioural intentions. They found that participants' emotional responses to a co-worker receiving recognition were moderated by the quality of the relationship between the two. Where the quality of the relationship was low, recognition led to the highest amount of negative emotions towards the co-worker, whereas the highest amount of positive emotions towards the co-worker emerged when then relationship quality was high. The study also revealed that recognition of a co-worker may lead to harmful interpersonally targeted behaviours such as verbal or physical abuse or deliberately failing to help a co-worker. Where the quality of the relationship between the two was low, recognition of the co-worker led to the highest amount of interpersonal counterproductive behaviour, whereas the lowest amount of interpersonal counterproductive behaviour was found when the relationship quality between the two was high.

The findings of this study indicate that understanding how employees react to their co-workers receiving recognition requires consideration of the quality of the relationship which they share. Furthermore, although recognition can have a positive effect on the motivation of the recipient, if applied in settings where the quality of relationships between co-workers is low it also has the potential to undermine the motivation of co-workers and lead to behaviours which may be harmful to individuals and the organisation.

2.6   Chapter conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to bring together academic research and relevant practitioner literature in order to identify the main issues surrounding and gaps in knowledge about employee recognition. I started by discussing the trend towards the proliferation of awards in modern society, driven by the growing need of individuals for recognition in their social and professional lives. I then explored the concept of

employee recognition from the perspective of both academics and practitioners, before outlining the two theoretical approaches of needs-based theories of motivation and basic reinforcement theory which have informed current understandings of employee recognition. Finally, I reviewed the existing academic research which has been conducted on employee recognition/recognition awards within the diverse fields of human resource management, economics and social/managerial psychology.

This review of the academic literature on employee recognition further highlighted the disparity, noted by previous researchers (e.g. Neckermann et al. 2010), between the amount of practitioner and "popular" literature advocating employee recognition and academic research on the subject. Given evidence of the popularity of employee recognition schemes and their increasing use within organisations (CIPD 2011, 2013; Garr 2012; Long and Shields 2010), there is a clear need for further research in this hitherto under-explored area.

The approach and focus of this thesis have been developed in response to a lack of research, identified through the review of the literature in this chapter, which has examined employee recognition from the perspective of the individuals involved. Existing research on employee recognition has taken an almost exclusively quantitative approach, and mainly focused on analysing the impact of recognition awards on behaviour (one exception being Long and Shields 2010). However, researchers have noted that there are a number of significant gaps within the literature on employee recognition which currently limit our understanding of employee recognition.

For example, Brun and Dugas (2008) call for more research on the impact that recognition or lack of recognition has on employees and organisations, as well as the obstacles to providing it. They note that there is a need to explore in greater detail the main conditions and dynamics to implementing employee recognition schemes. Bradler et al. (2013) concur, observing that very little is known about how recognition should be provided and the factors which lead to effective recognition. Long and Shields (2010) note the need for research investigating the ways in which non-cash recognition and cash-based forms of reward interact within a total reward management system. As part of this research they suggest that it would be useful to distinguish between factors which may explain why managers might find non-cash recognition

attractive as a reward option and those factors which might account for why employees might find them motivating. Taken together, these suggestions indicate a substantial gap in the literature and an opportunity for my research to make a distinctive contribution in the literature on employee recognition.

This review also suggested that there may be both positive and negative consequences of employee recognition. There is existing empirical research which suggests that employee recognition can positively affect the behaviour and performance of employees. However, there are a small but growing number of studies which suggest that employee recognition schemes may carry unintended consequences. In particular, the findings of these studies indicate that recognition awards affect not just award recipients but also their co-workers, suggesting that there are social implications to employee recognition which need investigating further before employee recognition is unreservedly recommended as a motivational strategy.

These insights into the potential negative implications of employee recognition have important implications for the approach and focus of the present research. As recognised in the previous chapter, I embarked upon this research journey with a generally favourable impression of the impact of recognition on employees as a result of my own positive experiences as a recipient. However, the process of reviewing the literature discussed in this chapter has given me a more sophisticated awareness of the depth and complexity of the concept and practice of employee recognition and the possible ways in which it may affect individuals. Furthermore, as noted above, Kohn (1993) argues that verbal rewards may be interpreted differently depending on the context in which they are given. Therefore, in this research, I aim to expand our understanding of the context-specific meaning of employee recognition by exploring the ways in which individuals interpret recognition within particular social and organisational contexts, and how the meanings given to recognition by individuals shape the outcomes of such schemes.

As Brun and Dugas (2008) acknowledge in their definition of employee recognition (see page 17), in its most basic form, recognition involves one individual making a judgement about another's contribution, performance, dedication or engagement. It is therefore an inherently social act involving at least two people: the giver and the recipient, and, in many cases, an audience. However, in an echo of Best's (2011)

observations about the state of research on status affluence, existing empirical research and theoretical approaches to employee recognition have focused on how recognition affects individual behaviour whilst largely ignoring its social implications.

Researchers in economics (e.g. Bradler et al. 2013) have already suggested theories of gift exchange as a possible theoretical explanation for performance improvements which occur following the receipt of awards. According to this perspective, individuals 'are interested in maintaining a balance between inputs and outputs and staying out of debt in their social transactions' (Blau 1964: 26), therefore employees receiving an award from their employer feel obligated to reciprocate by increasing their efforts. Frey (2006) also discusses how awards can be used to create a bond between the donor and recipient. He argues that throughout history governments have bestowed awards upon individuals whose loyalty is in doubt, especially in the case of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. There may be negative consequences for the would-be recipient if they refuse the award, however, if they accept the award, they are also agreeing to enter into a special kind of relationship with the government, where they owe it some degree of loyalty.

The application of theories of gift giving to the study of employee recognition suggests that recognition may be used by the organisation to create a bond with its employees. However, as noted by Brun and Dugas (2008), recognition may be expressed, not just by the organisation or manager, but also by co-workers and customers, clients and suppliers. Indeed, Rose (2011) observes that most organisations have some form of peer-to-peer recognition and many organisations, especially in service-related industries, have developed some kind of award system based on nominations from customers, suggesting that recognition may also have a social function to establish relationships between co-workers and with customers. Having identified the use of employee recognition schemes as a way of creating a bond between the co-workers or employees and customers as an area rich in potential for future research, I decided to focus in this research on recognition schemes which have a peer-to-peer element. Chapter Four provides a more detailed account of the process of recruiting research organisations to this study.

This social function of recognition is not fully accounted for by the current theoretical perspectives of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory which focus

on the behaviour of individuals. However, theories of gift giving offer a promising alternative theoretical basis for employee recognition. In the next chapter, I turn to discuss these theories of gift giving in greater detail and consider how viewing recognition as a form of gift may enhance our understanding of the social function and implications of employee recognition.

Chapter Three: Review of the literature on gift giving

3.1   Introduction

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the existing literature on employee recognition and the theories of needs-based motivation and reinforcement which are commonly used as the theoretical justification for employee recognition schemes. The chapter concluded that the social functions and implications of employee recognition schemes within the workplace require further theoretical exploration and explanation.

With the aim of expanding knowledge of the social function of employee recognition, in this chapter, I engage with existing literature on gift giving and outline the ways in which such literature helps to illuminate my own examination of employee recognition. The depth and complexity of existing scholarly debate around gift giving practices means that the following overviews can only hope to offer selectively limited discussions of those elements deemed most pertinent to this research topic, rather than an exhaustive view of the approaches of different disciplines and their contributors. However, as demonstrated by the discussions to follow, such an approach can still reveal significant insights which can be used to further understanding of employee recognition.

I begin this review by discussing the work of anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and Marcel Mauss (1925/2011). Next, I consider the classic sociological models of exchange of Alvin Gouldner (1960) and Peter M. Blau (1964) which emphasise notions of reciprocal exchange in order to explain the practice of gift giving. Related literature from social psychology on the psychological state of indebtedness is also examined. I conclude this section of the chapter by briefly summarising those elements of the anthropological and sociological literature which are considered to be particularly useful to the present study of the social functions and implications of employee recognition practices.

In the second part of the chapter, I incorporate the views of writers who offer alternative perspectives to the reciprocal exchange model of gift giving. I first consider two economic models of gift giving advanced by Colin Camerer (1988) and Canice Prendergast and Lars Stole (2001) which view gifts as signals of information. I then discuss the perspective of Lee Anne Fennell (2002) who also emphasises the communicative function served by gift giving, arguing that gift giving can help to

develop significant relationships based upon empathy rather than expectation of return. This leads on to a consideration of the social psychological perspective of Barry Schwartz (1967) where gift giving is seen as a means of identity construction and status maintenance. Finally, I briefly discuss a growing body of economic literature which applies theories of gift giving in the analysis of manager-worker relationships in the workplace. This review leads me to the conclusion that this research would be greatly enhanced by employing theories of gift giving to gain a deeper understanding of the social functions and implications of employee recognition.

3.2   Anthropological and sociological approaches to gift giving

3.2.1   Anthropological accounts of gift giving

One of the most significant anthropological accounts of exchange relations can be found in Bronislaw Malinowski's discussion of the Kula exchange in the Trobriand Islands in *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Malinowski is credited as the first social scientist to draw a clear distinction between economic exchange and social exchange (Ekeh 1974). He describes the Kula as 'a form of exchange of extensive, inter-tribal character…[involving] communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands which form a closed circuit' (Malinowski 1922: 81). Kula exchange is regulated by a strict set of rules and conventions and may only be conducted within lifelong relationships between Kula partners. Twice a year, overseas expeditions take place where the visitors bring a small opening gift which the hosts reciprocate by offering the Kula gift. At the second visit, the visitors, now acting as hosts, offer a counter-gift. Only two kinds of items are exchanged, arm-shells (*mwali*) and necklaces (*soulava*). These are constantly moving in opposite directions, arm-shells being exchanged for necklaces or vice-versa.

However, Malinowski emphasises that the Kula is not an economic transaction; the two items being exchanged have symbolic rather than economic value or practical use. The motivation to engage in Kula exchange transactions is not economic but social and psychological, based on the 'fundamental human impulse to display, to share, to bestow [and] the deep tendency to create social ties through the exchange of gifts' (Malinowski 1922: 175). Thus, engaging in social exchange satisfies both the psychological needs of the individual and fulfils a social purpose to create and maintain an interlocking network of social relationships. Malinowski likens the Kula

exchange items to trophies held for a time by a winning team or individual, from which the holders derive 'a special type of pleasure by the mere fact of owning them, or being entitled to them' (1922: 95), although 'the privilege of decorating oneself with them is not the real aim of possession' (1922: 88). The owner draws a great deal of importance and pride from exhibiting these items, most of which have their own names and histories, telling others how he acquired them and planning to whom he is going to give them next (Malinowski 1922: 94).

Rather than keeping and using the items, the recipients of the Kula exchange items are obliged to hold them for a short period of time then pass them on to the next trading partner, who gives them an equivalent counter-gift in exchange. The equivalence of the counter-gift is left to the giver; it may never be discussed and must not be enforced by any kind of coercion. Malinowski describes the Kula exchange transactions as 'based on a special form of credit, which implies a high degree of mutual trust and commercial honour' (1922: 86). Keeping the partners to the terms of the exchange is a moral code in which meanness is the most despised vice and generosity is the most important of virtues.

Malinowski's description of the Kula exchange captured the attention of anthropologists since it did not conform to notions of barter involving the exchange of basic goods mutually agreed to be of value or use by trading partners (Sykes 2005). For Malinowski, this distinction derived from the natives' own beliefs and behaviour: 'The natives sharply distinguish…[the Kula] from barter, which they practise extensively, of which they have a clear idea, and for which they have a settled term': *gimwali* (1922: 96). Indeed, an individual considered to have acted improperly in his Kula exchange transactions or given a counter-gift too hastily would be accused of conducting his Kula "as if it were *gimwali*" (Malinowski 1922: 96).

Although emphasising that the ceremonial exchange of arm-shells and necklaces is the main aspect of the Kula, Malinowski notes that economic transactions are also performed 'under its cover' (1922: 83). Thus, 'side by side with the ritual exchange of arm-shells and necklaces, the natives carry on ordinary trade, bartering from one island to another a great number of utilities' (Malinowski 1922: 83). No bartering takes place between Kula partners themselves but between the visitors and local natives who belong to the community with whom the Kula is made. This has led to the view that

the Kula acts as 'an important mechanism for establishing a peaceful social order... [for] the mutual advantage of economic exchange' (Ziegler 2012: 17).

Another anthropologist interested in how the exchange of objects can bring about and maintain social ties between individuals and groups is Marcel Mauss. In his highly influential work, *The Gift*, Mauss conducted a detailed comparative analysis of published anthropological studies of "primitive" or "archaic" societies, focusing particularly on the regions of Polynesia, Melanesia and North-West America. He discovered that 'a part of mankind, wealthy, hard-working and creating large surpluses, exchanges vast amounts in ways and for reasons other than those with which we are familiar from our own societies' (1925/2011: 31). He called these ceremonies and rituals of 'constant give-and-take' (1925/ 2011: 27), in which all members of the society are involved, "total prestations", social activities which are religious, legal, moral and economic all at the same time.

Based on this observation, Mauss developed his theory of "the economy of the gift", which he distinguished from the type of "commodity economy" found in Western societies. For Mauss, a gift is distinguished from a commodity by the nature of the relationship within which the transaction takes place; gifts are 'transacted as part of social as distinct from more purely monetary or material relations' (Carrier 1991: 122). According to Mauss, these gifts are 'in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested' (1925/2011: 1). He argues that the systems of exchange in archaic societies centre around three interlocking obligations: to give, to receive, and to repay (Mauss 1925/2011: 10-11). He found these obligations to be particularly powerful in the tribal societies on the North American coast, where hierarchical relationships within and between clans, villages and nations are established and reinforced through the distribution and sometimes destruction of wealth in ceremonies called potlatches.

Mauss observed that, in these societies, there is a close relationship between prestige and expenditure. In order for a chief within the North American coastal tribes to maintain his authority in their tribe, village and family, and position with other chiefs, he must 'prove that he is favourably regarded by the spirits, that he possesses fortune and that he is possessed by it' (Mauss 1925/2011: 37). He is obliged to hold a potlatch ceremony, giving away many items such as blankets and decorated copper plates

(which serve as symbols of wealth in this society) to his guests, thus demonstrating his wealth and status and putting his guests 'in the shadow of his name' (Mauss 1925/2011: 38). The guests are under an equally strong obligation to receive. Those invited to a potlatch must accept the invitation and the gifts they are offered. To refuse would be to be seen as showing fear of having to reciprocate and would lead them to 'lose the weight' of their name (Mauss 1925/2011: 39). As Mauss notes, 'Failure to give or receive, like failure to make return gifts, means a loss of dignity' (1925/2011: 40).

Indeed, it is this third obligation, the obligation to repay, which Mauss describes as 'the essence of the potlatch' (1925/2011: 40). Guests at a potlatch are under a strict obligation to repay the gifts they have received with interest 'in such a way that the creditor becomes the debtor' (Mauss 1925/2011: 35). Thus, if a guest receives a blanket from his chief, he must repay two blankets upon the marriage of the chief's daughter or on the initiation of the chief's son (Mauss 1925/2011: 40). There are serious consequences for failing to repay what has been given in either equal or greater value than what was received: a man can lose prestige, his social position and possibly even his freedom. Mauss notes that, for the Kwakiutl, Haida and Tsimshian tribes, the penalty for failing to repay gifts received is enslavement for debt (1925/2011: 41). Thus, we can see that, in a departure from the Western view of the gift as something which is voluntarily given with no expectation of return (Carrier 1991), Mauss' conception of the gift is one of a loan which must be repaid: 'these things are loaned rather than sold and ceded' (1925/2011: 42). As Gregory states, 'The gift economy…is a debt economy' (1982: 19). The giving of gifts creates debts which must be repaid.

However, Gregory goes on to explain: 'What a gift transactor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates, and not the things themselves' (1982: 19). Indeed, this is one of the key differences between commodity exchange and gift exchange: in commodity exchange, a relationship is created between the objects exchanged whereas, in gift exchange, a relationship is created between the parties involved (Gregory 1982). Unlike commodity exchange where the obligations which temporarily link the parties are dissolved once the transaction is completed, in gift exchange, '[f]ulfilling the obligation to give does not discharge it; it recreates it by reaffirming the relationship of which the obligation is a part' (Carrier 1991: 124).

To better understand this, one must also take into account the second element of Mauss' conception of the gift: inalienability. For Mauss, gifts are 'never completely separated from the men who exchange them' (1925/2011: 31) so 'in giving them a man gives himself' (1925/2011: 45). Due to the bond between giver and gift, the gift is thought of as bearing the identity of the giver and of the relationship between the giver and the recipient (Carrier 1991). An example would be the small (and often useless) gifts my friends and I bring back for each other from our holidays which remind us of each other, and so affirm and strengthen the relationship which we share. By contrast, in commodity exchange, a clear distinction is drawn between objects and people through the notion of private property. Once sold, the ownership rights of an object pass completely to the new owner and the object becomes alienated from its original owner. An example would be the book I purchased for myself from my local bookstore which turned out to be boring. The difference between alienable and inalienable objects can be nicely illustrated in my treatment of the book as compared to the gift from my friend. While I can donate the book to my local charity shop without considering the bookstore from which it was originally purchased, I would be reluctant to discard the gift from my friend, as ugly or useless as it might be, since to do so would signal not just a rejection of the gift but also a rejection of her and our relationship (Carrier 1991).

Although, in *The Gift*, Mauss presents gifts and commodities as characteristic of different types of societies, some later interpretations of Mauss approach gifts and commodities as defining different kinds of relations which can each be found within the same society (e.g. Carrier 1991; Gregory 1980). Indeed, my example above featuring the gift from my friend and the book I purchased for myself seems to support this reading. Carrier argues, 'Gift giving does occur in capitalist societies, just as buying and selling occurs in societies of the gift' (1991: 132), as demonstrated by Malinowski's observation of *gimwali* (barter) performed under the cover of the Kula in the Trobriand Islands. According to this interpretation, gifts and commodities should be viewed not as distinct categories of relations, but as 'poles defining a continuum' (Carrier 1991: 132). In social life, there are many examples of transactions containing elements of both gift and commodity relations, which blend both personal and economic relationships, and objects which are at once inalienable and alienated.

One such example is provided by Osteen who describes purchasing goods from a man who delivers fruit and vegetables to residents of the local neighbourhood in his van:

> One could argue that the transactions retain a vestige of the gift because the man delivers to our home; they involve a personal relationship as well as an economic one… We continue to give him our custom, not for convenience's sake (since we visit the supermarket every week, it would actually be more convenient to buy produce there than to leave a note for him), but because over the years we have come to know and respect this man…his personal attention contrasts starkly with the gleaming, sterile ambience of the supermarket. His presence and good humour make the world seem a friendlier place. Consequently, his fruit and vegetables seem less alienated; because our beans were *his* beans…And although we pay full price for the produce, because it carries our grocery man's stamp it bears a kind of weak inalienability.

(Osteen 2002: 20-1, original emphasis)

Therefore, according to Carrier, Mauss offers more than just the observation that certain forms of transactions are more dominant in some societies than others; his model of exchange 'entails a theory of people, objects, and social relations, and the ways in which they are made and remade, understood and reunderstood in everyday transactions' (1991: 121). All of these elements (people, objects and social relationships) are interconnected; in order to understand any individual part, one must first understand how each is involved in creating and recreating the others (Strathern 1988, cited in Carrier 1991: 122). For example, objects take their meaning from the particular social relationships within which they are exchanged and the people who exchange them. Thus, for Mauss, "gift" does not refer to either the object or the service itself, rather, what makes a gift is the relationship within which the transaction occurs (Carrier 1991).

The above overview has presented a number of different ways of conceptualising gift giving: as distinct from economic (or commodity) exchange; as having social and psychological, rather than economic, motivations; as a means of creating and maintaining stable social relationships which make economic exchange possible; as both obligatory and creating obligations in the recipient; as involving objects which

are inalienably tied to the giver, the recipient and the relationship which they share; and finally as a model in which people, objects, social relationships and transactions form an interconnected whole, with each part involved in creating and recreating the others. Each of these conceptual elements will play an important role in enhancing this study's consideration of the social functions and implications of employee recognition practices.

3.2.2 Sociological models of reciprocal exchange

Writers within the field of sociology have repeatedly drawn upon the above anthropological accounts of gift exchange systems in an attempt to understand the practice of gift giving as it exists in modern life. The one-sided and voluntary act of transferring goods or services to another is considered 'problematic' (Rose 1992: 301) by those committed to the pervasive self-interest models of human behaviour. In an attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction, sociological models of gift giving have tended to emphasise the concept of reciprocity found in early anthropological accounts of gift giving practices.

One of the key contributors to understandings of the concept of reciprocity and its role in social life is Alvin Gouldner. In his seminal article, *The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement* (1960), Gouldner begins with the observation that, 'Men have been insisting on the importance of reciprocity for some time' (1960: 161). L.T. Hobhouse writes that 'reciprocity…is the vital principle of society' (1951, cited in Gouldner 1960: 161), while George Simmel (1950) asserts that 'the reciprocity of service and return service' are vital to the establishment and maintenance of stable social systems (1950: 387). Gouldner agrees, arguing that the stability of a social system depends on the 'mutually contingent exchange of gratifications…on reciprocity as exchange' (Gouldner 1960: 168). If there is no such 'mutuality of gratifications' (Parsons and Shils 1951, cited in Gouldner 1960: 168), the stability of the social system will be threatened (Gouldner 1960).

However, Gouldner goes a stage further in his discussion of the importance of reciprocity by making a distinction between two 'elements' of reciprocity: firstly as a 'pattern of exchange through which the mutual dependence of people, brought about by the division of labor, is realised', and secondly as a 'generalized moral

norm…which defines certain actions and *obligations* as repayments for benefits received' (Gouldner 1960: 169-170; original emphasis).

The roots of Gouldner's characterisation of the first meaning of reciprocity as a 'mutually contingent exchange of benefits and gratifications' (1960: 170) can be found in the anthropological accounts of gift exchange systems by Malinowski and Mauss. For example, Malinowski described the Kula exchange in the Trobriand Island as a system of mutual obligations which forces an individual to reciprocate whenever he has received a gift from his Kula partner, and vice versa. Gouldner states that the natives participate in this mutual exchange because they hold one or more of the following three beliefs: a) that, in the long-term, both sides will benefit equally from the exchange; b) that they will be subject to certain penalties should they not help those who have helped them; and c) they can expect those to whom they have provided help to help them should they need it (1960: 170).

However, for Gouldner, the duties and obligations of Kula partners, for example, are theoretically distinct from the general norm of reciprocity. The 'specific and complementary duties are owed by role partners to one another by virtue of the social standardized roles they play' whereas the general norm of reciprocity 'evokes obligations towards others on the basis of their past behavior' (Gouldner 1960: 170). Thus, Gouldner argues that it is not simply their mutual dependency which compels each side to fulfil their obligations but also because they share the same moral norm of reciprocity which entails that 'You *should* give benefits to those who give you benefits' (1960: 170; original emphasis).

According to Gouldner, the general norm of reciprocity contributes to the stability of social systems in two key ways. Firstly, in situations where there is a power imbalance between the individuals involved in the exchange, there is an increased risk of reciprocity breaking down as the more powerful individual may be tempted to gain benefits without returning them. The norm of reciprocity, however, provides the motives for reciprocating benefits, 'serving to inhibit the emergence of exploitative relations which would undermine the social system…' (Gouldner 1960: 174). Secondly, exchange transactions typically take place over time, with the individual who has received benefits not reciprocating straight away (the Kula exchange discussed above being a prime example of delayed reciprocity). The norm of

reciprocity governs the intervening time period during which the recipient of the benefits is indebted to the donor (Gouldner 1960). Under the norm of reciprocity, it would be considered 'morally improper' for an individual to injure or break off social relations with those to whom they remain indebted, and it is also unlikely that the individuals to whom the debt is owed will move to end the relationship while the debt still exists (Gouldner 1960: 174). Thus, the internalised norm of reciprocity contributes to the stability of the social system by inducing both parties to maintain their relationship.

However, Gouldner's assumption that an individual's reciprocity obligations should be met by providing a return benefit directly to the individual who provided the benefit has attracted criticism. Following Claude Lévi-Strauss (1957), Peter Ekeh argues that Gouldner's model of a 'two-person 'A-B' mutual reciprocal interaction' can only partially explain the social exchange behaviour apparent in social life (1974: 204). In order to better explain social exchange interactions involving more than two individuals, Lévi-Strauss introduced a distinction between mutual reciprocity (as discussed by Gouldner) and univocal reciprocity. Put simply, univocal reciprocation is a social system in which an individual A helps an individual B, but does not expect a reciprocal return from B but rather from another individual C or D (Ekeh 1974). Ekeh gives the example of seeing burglars in his neighbour's house. He argues that he has a duty to call the police, not because he expects some form of reciprocation from his neighbour but because he expects any of his neighbours to do the same if they were to see burglars in his own house. However, as Ekeh notes, 'univocal reciprocity can only operate in an atmosphere of generalized morality and trust', as the giver must trust that they will receive a reciprocal benefit from someone else in the future (1974: 205).

Ekeh also highlights the limitations of Gouldner's conception of the norm of reciprocity as demanding that individuals a) should help those who have helped them, and b) should not injure those who have helped them: It 'suggests that the norm of reciprocity operates in face-to-face interactions and that it compels reciprocation only for what has actually been given or received' (1974: 206). By contrast, the norm of univocal reciprocity requires that individuals should a) help/provide benefits to those who now need the type of help/benefits that they may need from others in the future, and b) should help/provide benefits to those who now need help/benefits which they

themselves were provided by another individual/group of individuals in the past (Ekeh 1974: 207).

Although writing on the usefulness of the reciprocity norm for studies of social support, Uehara (1995) identifies a number of implications of the reciprocity norms which are also pertinent to the study of employee recognition. The most significant is the assumption that individuals may be motivated to act by moral beliefs. This implies that, when seeking to understand how employee recognition schemes operate, it is important to consider not just the influence of social and organisational factors on the process but also the ways in which the moral beliefs (such as the reciprocity norms) held by the individuals involved mediate their interactions with each other.

Furthermore, as Uehara notes, an important characteristic of such moral norms is their generality. This means that the application of the norms is not limited to specific cases but instead can be applied to a wide variety of different interactions, involving different individuals. However, this generality also means that the norms are vague as to how individuals should meet specific obligations in specific situations (Uehara 1995). Individuals are left to independently decide how, how much and how soon they should reciprocate benefits they have received 'in such a way as to balance their own needs and interests with moral obligations' in the context of real-life social relationships and situations (Etzioni 1988, cited in Uehara 1995: 486).

Primarily interested in how individuals conceive of and resolve these issues presented by exchange interactions, Uehara makes reference to a body of literature from social psychology examining recipient responses to receiving help or aid. Although recognition is conceptually distinct from help, several similarities can be found between the two, making consideration of the literature on help-giving worthwhile for the purposes of this present research. Like writers on recognition, early researchers have tended to regard help-giving as something of a "universal good" which has led them to overlook some of the potential costs to the recipient involved in the process (Fisher 1983). However, later studies have challenged the expectation that recipients will be appreciative of the help received, suggesting that there may also be a negative side to the receipt of help (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). Fisher states, 'Help is often a positive interpersonal act, but one with complex properties which cause recipients to respond to it either favourably or unfavourably' (1983: 4).

Hatfield and Sprecher (1983) suggest that equity theory may provide a useful framework for understanding the different reactions of recipients to receiving help. Equity theory (Adams 1963; Walster, Walster and Berscheid 1978) assumes that individuals compare the ratio of their own contributions and benefits to those of others. An equitable relationship is believed to exist when the individual concludes that all parties are receiving equal relative benefits from the relationship. However, according to Hatfield and Sprecher, if an individual concludes that they are engaged in an inequitable relationship, they will become distressed and attempt to reduce this distress by restoring equity. Individuals who perceive themselves to be under-benefitting from the inequitable relationship are likely to label their distress as anger or resentment towards the other party, while those who consider themselves to be over-benefiting may describe their distress as guilt, fear of retaliation or indebtedness (Hatfield and Sprecher 1983).

Indeed, Greenberg and Westcott (1983) argue that the feeling of indebtedness is one of the key mediators of recipient reactions to help. Indebtedness is defined as a psychological state having 'motivational properties such that the greater the magnitude of indebtedness, the greater the resultant arousal and discomfort and, hence, the stronger the ensuing attempt to deal with or reduce it' (Greenberg 1980: 4). The recipient may seek to alleviate this tension by either reciprocating or cognitively re-evaluating the situation to reduce their indebtedness, for example by devaluing the help received and/or inflating the extent of their costs and the donor's rewards for giving (Greenberg and Shapiro 1971).

Although more frequently the feeling of indebtedness generates a negative response from the recipient, there are some cases where a recipient may be aware that an obligation to repay the donor has been created but still experience the help as positive because it facilitates the achievement of other needs in the individual (Greenberg 1980). Two examples are suggested by Greenberg and Westcott (1983). Firstly, the recipient may interpret the help as a conscious attempt on the part of the donor to obligate them to reciprocate and infer from this that the donor considers their services or resources to be valuable, satisfying their need for esteem. Another possibility is that the obligation to reciprocate requires and offers legitimacy to further interactions with the donor which are welcomed by the recipient.

However, more commonly, the awareness that accepting the help has created an obligation for them to repay the donor appears to be a powerful source of negative feelings about the help and/or the donor (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). For example, the recipient may become suspicious of the donor's motives for helping, perhaps believing the help to be a conscious attempt to obligate the recipient to the donor under the pretence of helping, thus provoking a negative response (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). The recipient may also feel that they have surrendered some of their freedom or power in future interactions with the donor, as a result of their indebtedness (Greenberg and Westcott 1983), or fear that the donor might demand a greater repayment than the recipient would have agreed, had the terms of the exchange been known at the time of receiving the help (Hatfield and Sprecher 1983). As Greenberg and Westcott note, in some cases, recipients respond negatively to help because they believe that the donor is attempting to make them indebted but, in other cases, the negative response is caused by the feeling of indebtedness itself.

Therefore, in order to better understand recipient responses to receiving help, it is necessary to identify the conditions under which help-giving leads to feelings of indebtedness. To this end, Greenberg and Westcott identify the following four determinants of the degree of indebtedness experienced by the recipient: the recipient's perception of a) the magnitude of rewards and costs incurred by the recipient and donor as a result of the help b) the locus of causality of the donor's action c) the donor's motives d) the judgements of others (1983: 88). Recipients weight each of these factors according to each factor's salience at the moment at which they assess their indebtedness, taking into consideration both the particular situation and individual personalities (Greenberg and Westcott 1983).

The rationale for the selection for three of these four factors can be found by re-visiting Gouldner's original (1960) paper in which he states:

> The value of the benefit and hence the debt is in proportion to and varies with- among other things- the intensity of the recipient's need at the time the benefit was bestowed ("a friend in need . . "), the resources of the donor ("he gave although he could ill afford it"), the motives imputed to the

donor ("without thought of gain"), and the nature of the constraints which are perceived to exist or to be absent ("he gave of his own free will . . .").

<div align="right">(Gouldner 1960: 171)</div>

The fourth factor determining the degree of indebtedness experienced by the recipients refers to situations in which recipients rely on the judgements of others, such as witnesses to the help, co-recipients or even the donor, to help them determine their state of indebtedness (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). The opinion of the donor was found to be particularly important in a study by Greenberg, Bar-Tal, Mowrey and Steinberg (1982, cited in Greenberg and Westcott 1983). Participants were asked to imagine that they had repaid a hypothetical donor but that the donor was unaware that they had done so. They were then asked to indicate how indebted they felt on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 represented "no longer feel indebted" and 7 represented "still feel indebted". Over half of the participants described their feelings of indebtedness as being between 4 and 7, suggesting that the recipients still felt indebted to their donors to the extent that the donor believed the debt to exist.

Since indebtedness is an aversive state, Greenberg and Shapiro (1971) argue that potential recipients may be reluctant to accept help if they are not confident that they will be able to reciprocate in the near future. A number of subsequent experiments sought to manipulate participants' opportunity to reciprocate in order to determine its influence on an individual's willingness to ask for help. Hatfield and Sprecher found that the recipient's ability to reciprocate 'seems to determine whether the doing of favors generates pleasant social reactions or resentment and suffering' (1983: 131-2). Indeed, the findings of these laboratory studies suggest that blocked opportunities to reciprocate can arouse negative feelings in the recipient and have further significant behavioural consequences.

For example, Greenberg and Shapiro's (1971) study examining adversity to indebtedness found that participants who anticipated that they would be unable to reciprocate help received were less willing to ask for help than those participants who anticipated being able to reciprocate the help. Morris and Rosen (1973) reported similar findings, suggesting that individuals are more likely to ask for help if they anticipate that there will be an opportunity for them to reciprocate. A further study by Schumaker and Jackson (1979) assessed the impact on their participants' mood of

<div align="center">54</div>

being placed in a state of indebtedness with no opportunity to reciprocate. Participants who were prevented from reciprocating help were more likely to feel guilty about receiving help than those participants who were able to reciprocate. Furthermore, participants who were prevented from repaying the donor viewed the donor less positively and said that they would be less willing to work with them again. This finding may suggest that, since the recipient is unable to relieve the tension caused by their indebted state, they are attempting to cognitively re-evaluate the situation in order to reduce their sense of indebtedness, for example by devaluing the help and/or increasing the benefits to the donor of providing the help.

A further alternative explanation for the negative reactions to being prevented from reciprocating may be derived from the work of Peter M. Blau (1964) who put forward his "social exchange" theory that social interaction is motivated by self-interest. The term 'social exchange', as Blau uses it, refers to 'voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do bring from others' (1964: 91). According to Blau, individuals evaluate the attractiveness of others based on whether they expect associating with them to be in some way rewarding, and the social rewards they anticipate receiving induce them to establish a social relationship, thus '[p]rocesses of social attraction…lead to processes of social exchange' (1964: 21).

Some social relations may be intrinsically rewarding (as in the case of friends who enjoy each other's company, regardless of the activity in which they are engaged) whereas other social relations may be rewarding in a different way (Blau 1964). When an individual performs a favour for another, it makes the recipient grateful, and their expression of gratitude is a social reward which makes performing favours enjoyable (especially if the recipient expresses their gratitude publically, thus enhancing the donor's reputation). Indeed, an important social reward sought by individuals in their interactions with others is social approval. However, Blau notes that, for social approval to have significance, it must be believed to be genuine. To coax or otherwise coerce an individual into expressing approval, praise or respect would render the expression 'worthless' (Blau 1964: 17). Furthermore, these positive evaluations will be experienced as rewarding by the individual only if they are believed to be 'spontaneous reactions rather than calculated means of pleasing' them (Blau 1964:

99). Blau cautions against bartering with positive evaluations of an individual 'lest they cease to be accepted as genuine and thus lose their significance' (1964: 100).

According to Blau, the most important social reward for providing favours, however, is repayment, with the grateful recipient seeking to return the favour by doing something for the donor. The donor, in turn, is likely to reciprocate and, over time, the exchange of favours will strengthen the social bond between the two. Indeed, for Blau, the fact that offering benefits to others tends to bring social rewards is one of the major reasons why individuals offer others help in the first place.

However, in explaining individuals' need to reciprocate, Blau departs from Gouldner's view that the norm of reciprocity serves as a 'starting mechanism' which helps to initiate social interaction (Gouldner 1960: 176). Although he holds that the norm of reciprocity has a reinforcing and stabilising role to play in social interaction, Blau argues that the starting mechanism for social intercourse is found in the 'existential conditions of exchange', rather than in the norm of reciprocity (1964: 92). For Blau, 'it is a necessary condition of exchange that individuals, in the interest of continuing to receive needed services, discharge their obligations for having received them in the past' (1964: 92). Thus, central to Blau's conception of social exchange is the assumption that the reason individuals reciprocate benefits received is to continue receiving them.

Failure to reciprocate benefits received has a number of negative consequences for the individual, including the discontinuation of future benefits. Suppose, for example, an individual whose neighbour has on a number of occasions babysat her children fails to return the favour when the opportunity arises. The next time she needs a babysitter for her children she cannot really ask her neighbour for help and, if she is cheeky enough to ask, the neighbour is likely to be disinclined to help. The neighbour may also become distrustful of the individual and avoid entering into any future arrangements with them, for example sharing the responsibility of driving their respective children to and from the cinema. The neighbour may also tell other mutual friends about the behaviour of the individual, leading them too to distrust her and be disinclined to do her favours, both in order to protect their own self-interest and out of disapproval that the individual has violated the moral norm that you should help those who have helped you (Blau 1964: 97). Finally, the internalised norm of reciprocity

will make the individual feel guilty about not helping her neighbour who had provided help to her previously. Therefore, the many potential disadvantageous consequences of failing to reciprocate benefits compel the individual to reciprocate and provide further explanation for the negative reactions of individuals to finding themselves unable or prevented from doing so.

As suggested by the example above, trust is essential for stable social exchange relations. Blau argues, 'The establishment of exchange relations involves making investments that constitute commitments to the other party' (1964: 98). The consequences could be quite different if we suppose that the individual in the above example, after receiving help from her neighbour, reciprocates by helping her neighbour when they ask. The first time the neighbour offers to babysit, they trust that the individual will return the favour should the opportunity arise in the future. By helping the neighbour when the neighbour asks, the individual shows that they are trustworthy of further favours. As a result of the investments made by the neighbour in cultivating a friendly relationship with the individual, in which they can exchange favours of various kinds, the neighbour is likely to feel committed to the relationship, making it disadvantageous for them to abandon their relationship in favour of a relationship with another individual. Furthermore, believing the neighbour to be committed to the relationship, the individual is likely to be more trusting that the neighbour will meet their obligations in the relationship (Blau 1964).

However, whilst reciprocation is important for the development of trust in social relationships, Blau also notes that too hasty reciprocation may imply an absence of trust and unwillingness to remain indebted. He argues that social bonds are strengthened 'by remaining obligated to others as well as by trusting them to discharge their obligations for considerable periods' (1964: 99). For example, the structure of the Kula exchange described by Malinowski is such that gift and counter-gift are separated by several months, meaning that each partner is alternately indebted to their partner, helping to maintain a pattern of peaceful interaction between them. In modern society, birthday gifts, dinner party invitations and small favours between friends follow a similar pattern, hence why individuals who repay their social debts too quickly can be viewed as wanting to engage in a more business-like, rather than social, relationship.

According to Blau, however, there are further reasons why individuals may be resistant to remaining indebted and so seek to discharge their obligations quickly. He argues that, besides establishing social ties between individuals, social exchange has a second function: to establish subordination over others.

> A person who gives others valuable gifts or renders them important services makes a claim for superior status by obligating them to himself. If they return benefits that adequately discharge their obligations, they deny his claim to superiority, and if their returns are excessive, they make a counterclaim to superiority over him. If they fail to reciprocate with benefits that are at least as important to him as his are to them, they validate his claim to superior status.
>
> (Blau 1984: 108)

Thus, the giving of gifts to others can be a means of establishing superiority over them. Individuals who need the goods or services provided by the donor but who are unable to reciprocate have little option but to place themselves in a position of subordination to the donor, thereby repaying the donor with power over themselves. Blau describes the power to command others' compliance as akin to 'credit' which the donor can use in the pursuit of a variety of different ends in the future (1964: 3).

The dual function of social exchange, as a means of establishing bonds of friendship on the one hand and of gaining superiority over other individuals on the other, reflects that there is 'a strain toward imbalance as well as toward reciprocity in social associations' (Blau 1964: 26). This tension can be seen in the way individuals seek to achieve balance in their relationships with others by reciprocating benefits received but are also interested in achieving imbalances in their favour which give them superior status and a source of power. This desire to gain 'instrumental advantage' in their social interactions is also likely to come into conflict with their desire to gain social approval (Blau 1964: 105). According to Blau, individuals often resolve these conflicts by seeking social approval and support in certain exchange relationships and pursuing instrumental advantage in others. For example, they might gain social approval and support for their generosity and helpfulness in exchange transactions within a family or social context, allowing them to pursue maximum benefits from their exchange transactions in a business context.

3.2.3   Section summary/discussion

There are a number of insights and conceptual elements within the literature reviewed in this section which are valuable for this present study of employee recognition practices. In particular, the concept of reciprocity which is central to the models explored above has useful applications in the context of employee recognition and consequently will inform the rest of this study.

Furthermore, the insights of Blau regarding the dual function of social exchange, to establish bonds of friendship and to establish subordination over others, will be indispensable to this study. The conflict between these two functions goes some way towards explaining the different responses of recipients to receiving recognition. An appreciation of the literature on recipient reactions to help, especially on the psychological state of indebtedness, will also be useful for my analysis of how the recipients of recognition understand and experience recognition. Like help, I view recognition as 'often a positive interpersonal act, but one with complex properties which cause recipients to respond to it either favourably or unfavourably' (Fisher 1983: 4). The findings of this research that the personal feelings and subjective perceptions of the donor and the recipient and the relationship between them strongly influence recipient reactions will further enhance my data analysis.

However, whilst valuable insights have been generated through the consideration of models which emphasise the reciprocal nature of gift giving, I am aware that such models are vulnerable to the criticism of 'reducing human motives and behaviour to a one-dimensional set of rules' (Osteen 2002: 33). Those critical of these models argue that, in order to understand gift giving, we must move away from the view of gift giving as taking place between purely self-interested, autonomous individuals only interested in the rewards gift giving can bring (Osteen 2002). In particular, the failure of this view in explaining why individuals choose to engage in charitable giving and other forms of altruistic behaviour is often used to challenge the assumption that individuals are driven to pursue rewards and minimise costs in their social lives. Rather, in his now-famous examination of the practice of blood donation, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (1972), Richard Titmuss argues that offering rewards for donating blood might actually "crowd out" the supply of

blood donors, as purely altruistic donors may feel less inclined to donate if a reward is involved.

In a further attempt to contest economic explanations of gift giving, Osteen (2002) describes a scenario in which his brother-in-law chooses to donate a kidney to him:

> He certainly gains a feeling of satisfaction, perhaps even heroism, from doing so; but it would be difficult to argue that such a reward is equivalent to the pain and risk he endures from undergoing the transplant surgery. The fact is, my brother-in-law's desire for me to live- because he loves me, because he feels that I have done nothing to deserve this pain, because he wants to challenge fate, whatever the reason- is stronger than any other factor, including his desire to avoid pain and death.
>
> (Osteen 2002: 32-3)

The example illustrates that some decisions are not purely rational and self-interested; individuals also care about the welfare of other human beings (Osteen 2002). Speaking about such acts of donation, Godbout argues 'people do not behave in accordance with utilitarian postulates. They do not calculate but act completely outside of this explicative model' (1998: 90).

Fortunately, the reciprocal exchange model favoured in the above approaches to gift giving is not the only way of approaching gift giving. There exists a body of literature which criticises the foregrounding of the concept of reciprocity in theories of gift giving and instead emphasises other motives and concepts. This literature and its applications to the present study will be discussed in the following section.

3.3   Alternative approaches to gift giving

3.3.1   Gifts as signals of information

In economics, the practice of gift giving has attracted considerable attention primarily due to the inefficiencies created by mismatched gifts and recipient preferences. As Waldfogel argues in his influential paper, 'The Deadweight Loss of Christmas' (1993), gift giving destroys between 10 per cent and a third of the monetary value of gifts. To avoid the deadweight loss as a result of the recipient under-valuing the gift, Waldfogel argues that the most economically efficient strategy for the donor would be

to give cash rather than attempt to guess a recipient's preferences. However, cash gifts typically carry a social stigma and to give a gift of cash rather than spending time selecting an appropriate gift for the recipient could be viewed as betraying the "spirit" of gift giving (Caplow 1982; Waldfogel 1993). Indeed, a phrase often used in connection with gift giving is "it's the thought that counts" and cash, it would seem, demonstrates little thought about what the recipient would like. The failure of standard economic theory to explain the practice of gift giving has led to the development of a substantial body of literature aimed at explaining the motivations behind gift giving as it exists in modern society and, in particular, the preference of donors for inefficient non-cash gifts over pure cash gifts.

Two signalling models are proposed by Camerer (1988) and Prendergast and Stole (2001). Both models are based on the assumption that gifts are actions taken by people which convey meaning, using the term "signal" (borrowed from information economics) to describe these meaningful actions (Camerer 1988: 182). For Camerer, gifts are used to signal the donor's intentions about future investment in the relationship. The example given is that of two suitors, one who seeks to marry the lady in question and the other who is only interested in spending the night with her. Whilst the first suitor is prepared to incur the costs of flowers, expensive meals and an engagement ring in anticipation of the expected long-term gains of their marriage, the second suitor cannot afford these costly investments since he anticipates receiving fewer gains from the short time he spends with her. Therefore, the lady can tell a lot about the intentions of her suitors based on the gifts they offer her.

Although Camerer notes that gift giving will often be reciprocal because donors hope that their investments will lead to the recipient making return investments in the relationship; the reciprocity involved in this signalling model is different to the role played by reciprocity in the sociological reciprocal exchange models discussed above. In these models, reciprocity is important because gifts are like loans where acceptance implies an obligation to repay whereas, for Camerer, gifts are like signals: actions which convey information about the intentions of not just the donor but also the recipient. The acceptance of an inefficient gift such as an engagement ring rather than its cash equivalent has an opportunity cost to the recipient. Therefore, by incurring that cost, they reveal their own willingness to invest in the relationship (Camerer 1988).

Camerer further argues that some gifts may serve multiple signalling purposes simultaneously, with the cost of the gift signalling something about the donor and the particular gift chosen signalling something else. He gives the example of a series of gifts all of which signal £50 worth of willingness to invest in the relationship, including £50 cash, a £50 gym-club certificate, lingerie costing £50 and a £50 bottle of wine. Although each of these gifts signals willingness equally well (£50 worth), each gift also signals something about the tastes the donor has or hopes the recipient will have in the future, how much the donor admires the recipient's body or feels it to be in need of improvement, or how well the donor knows (or does not know) the recipient and their preferences.

The recipient's investment in the relationship will be guided both by knowing the willingness of a partner to invest and whether this person is a close friend who knows their tastes well or a casual friend who does not know their tastes. According to Camerer, '…[c]lose friends can distinguish themselves from casual friends by giving me things I like' (1988: 193). To give an example of my own: At my last birthday, my friend's thoughtful gift to me of some mirrored drinks coasters for my new (art deco inspired) living room revealed both that she was willing to invest (her time, money and thought) in our relationship and that she knew my tastes well enough to choose a gift which I liked. This, in turn, made me value our relationship more and be more inclined to invest in it.

Building upon Camerer's theory that gifts can signal how much the donor knows about the recipient's tastes, Prendergast and Stole argue that people give non-cash gifts to convey the certainty with which they understand the preferences of the recipients of their gifts. It is expected that donors who have better information will be more likely to offer gifts in order to demonstrate the quality of their knowledge of the recipient's preferences whereas donors who are uncertain about the recipient's preferences will seek to avoid the potential for deadweight loss by offering a cash gift instead. This model is based on two related assumptions: firstly, that donors value that they are known to understand the preferences of recipients and, secondly, that an individual who can show that they understand the preferences of their partner is likely to be considered a more attractive partner than an individual who has no idea about what their partner would like. For this reason, Prendergast and Stole acknowledge that their model is most helpful in explaining gift giving which takes place within new

relationships rather than those between long-term partners where levels of uncertainty are likely to be lower.

In presenting their model, Prendergast and Stole start with the simple but important observation that non-cash gift giving involves two components: (i) the donor searches for an appropriate gift for the recipient and (ii) the donor purchases and gives the gift to the recipient. They ask why, if it really is "the thought that counts", the donor must actually purchase the gift. Surely it would be more efficient for the donor to simply tell the recipient what they would have purchased (demonstrating that they have thought about and have a good understanding of the recipient's preferences), then proceed to make a cash gift (thus avoiding the potential for deadweight loss incurred by giving a non-cash gift).

Prendergast and Stole's explanation for why donors persist in giving non-cash gifts rather than employing the strategy above is that they do so in order to demonstrate the certainty with which they understand the preferences of their recipients. Although the donor could show that they have thought about what the recipient would like without actually purchasing the item, the purchasing of a non-cash gift can be used to demonstrate certainty in a way which is not possible with a cash gift. The authors claim that this offers a possible explanation for the social stigma which exists around cash gifts since they signal that the donor has no idea about the recipient's preferences. Therefore, the choice made by the donor of a gift over cash can reveal useful information to the recipient about how well the donor understands their preferences.

A possible weakness of this model, acknowledged by the authors, is that there may, of course, be times when people give non-cash gifts which reveal very little about what they know about the recipient. A common example would be store gift vouchers. Within this model, there is no place for this type of non-cash gift. Instead, Prendergast and Stole suggest that the act of disguising something which is essentially cash in a way which makes it seem less like cash is motivated by a desire to avoid the appearance of an impersonal market transaction. However, for a donor who is uncertain about the preferences of their recipient but who wants to avoid the social stigma associated with a cash gift, the purchase of a gift voucher may minimise the risk of deadweight loss, albeit without signalling the certainty with which they understand the recipient' preferences.

A further interesting implication of this model is that some non-cash gifts are 'too easy' (Prendergast and Stole 2001: 1805). For example, most people who know me know that I enjoy drinking Diet Coke; this is not a secret known only by those closest to me. Therefore, a gift of a crate of Diet Coke which the donor is absolutely certain that I will value would not be a good way of signalling how well they know me. According to Prendergast and Stole, this kind of gift is akin to offering cash since 'a gift only has signalling value if there is a reasonable possibility that an unknowledgeable donor could get it wrong' (2001: 1805). Therefore, a donor wishing to demonstrate that they truly understand my preferences will take greater risks in selecting a gift for me, rather than opting for the 'easy' or 'obvious' choice (Prendergast and Stole 2001: 1806).

Although the two models discussed in this section offer different perspectives on the content of the information signalled by gift giving, both consider gifts to be actions which convey meaning. This insight may be usefully applied to the study of employee recognition, suggesting that multiple meanings and messages may be conveyed through the giving and receiving of recognition, including the willingness of the donor and recipient to invest in a relationship, about how well the donor knows or does not know the recipient, how the donor views the recipient and so on.

Also, whilst not discussed in any depth, it is implied within these models that there is the potential for misunderstanding, for the recipient to interpret gifts negatively or in ways which run contrary to the intentions of the donor. For example, in Camerer's example of the series of gifts which all signal £50 worth of willingness, although perhaps well-meant, the gift of a gym membership to a recipient who privately feels self-conscious about their weight may be interpreted as embarrassing or insulting. Similarly, a gift of lingerie may be intended by the donor to signal appreciation of the recipient's body and the donor's willingness to invest in a relationship with them but the recipient may feel this gift to be inappropriate and interpret the gift as a sign of the donor's purely sexual interest in them. This awareness of the potential for misunderstanding in the process of gift giving will be invaluable to this study going forward.

3.3.2 Gifts as a form of communication

A second alternative to models of gift giving which emphasise reciprocity is proposed by Fennell. Although illuminating in itself, when viewed as a complement to the signalling models, Fennell's conceptualisation of gift giving as 'a specialized form of communication' (2002: 86) suggests other possible motives and explanations for engaging in gift giving besides the expectation of return and therefore has interesting implications for the study of employee recognition.

Fennell argues that the fact that gifts tend to generate returns for the donor (whether these returns are intangible, such as appreciation, gratitude, loyalty, respect, power and status, or tangible, such as cash or a non-cash gift) does not mean that gift interactions should be treated as "tit-for-tat" market transactions. Her critique of models which seek to conflate gift giving and market exchange is founded upon the observation that gift giving typically involves the intentional conversion of cash into an illiquid object, an action which would be 'nonsensical as an opening move in a market exchange' (Fennell 2002: 85). From an economic standpoint, the conversion of a liquid asset into an illiquid one seems inefficient and irrational both due to the costs incurred by the donor to do so and the risk of the recipient under-valuing the monetary value of the gift, thus potentially reducing the expected return to the donor (Fennell 2002; Waldfogel 1993).

The conversion of liquid resources into illiquid items cannot be motivated by the expectation of a reciprocal gift since, as Fennell notes, 'no conceivable reciprocal gift can match the efficiency of simply taking one's cash into the marketplace' (2002: 88). If the recipient chooses to make a reciprocal gift at all, they too will convert cash into an illiquid item to give to the original donor, although its monetary value is likely to be lower than the value of the original gift due to the recipient typically under-valuing gifted items (Fennell 2002; Waldfogel 1993). Thus, Fennell concludes that the notions of reciprocal exchange cannot account for the intentional illiquidity of gift items and that 'a new vocabulary' for understanding gift giving is needed (2002: 85).

To this end, Fennell suggests that gift giving is more profitably conceived of as a 'specialized form of communication' (2002: 86). Viewing gift giving in this way provides a more credible explanation for the intentional illiquidity of gift items since illiquid items have greater communicative potential than cash (Fennell 2002: 86).

Thus, for Fennell, illiquidity is absolutely 'indispensable' if the gift is to perform its communicative function, which may explain the social perception of cash gifts as "cold" or "impersonal" (2002: 86). Although Fennell notes that there are circumstances where cash is viewed as an acceptable gift, she argues that, where money is considered an appropriate gift, implicit or explicit constraints are placed on what the recipient can use the money to purchase. The donor might explicitly state the intended use for the money ("put this towards X") or put some foreign currency in a card with the message that the recipient should use it on their upcoming holiday. A cash gift may also have implied limits on what it would be appropriate for the recipient to purchase with the money. For example, money received from a relative afflicted with cancer may not, in good conscience, be used to purchase a pack of cigarettes.

According to Fennell, the special form of communication brought about through gift giving has the potential to facilitate what she calls 'empathetic dialogue' between donor and recipient, explaining:

> In selecting a suitable gift, the donor puts herself in the place of the recipient and tries to determine not what the recipient would purchase for himself, but what the recipient would most want to receive from this particular donor. The recipient, in turn, imaginatively recreates the donor's empathetic efforts in selecting the gift (Cheal 1988: 63). Through the operation of this empathetic dialogue, a gift can gain "sentimental value" above and beyond the market value of the underlying commodity.
>
> (Fennell 2002: 86)

Such empathetic dialogue acts as a benchmark against which the success of a gift may be gauged (Fennell 2002). A successful or 'true' gift involves both the donor and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other, the donor seeking to predict the type of gift which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the amount of effort and thought the donor put into the selection of the gift (Fennell 2002: 94). However, the gift may fail if either the donor is unable or unwilling to exercise empathetic imagination and/or the recipient fails to empathetically identify with the donor's imaginative efforts in selecting the gift.

Thus, the concept of empathetic dialogue provides an alternative explanation for negative recipient reactions to receiving gifts. Donors may fail to accurately predict

the type of gift which the recipient would like (from them or anyone else), resulting in gifts which are unwanted or even offensive to the recipient. To use an earlier example, a donor might select a gym membership for the gym where they are also a member. In deciding on this gift, the donor might imagine that the two could spend time together whilst using the gym's equipment and facilities. The recipient, on the other hand, may secretly feel self-conscious about their body and view the gift as suggesting that they need to lose some weight. They may feel embarrassed and insulted imagining that, when selecting the gym membership, the donor was making unfavourable judgements about their body. Furthermore, if the recipient expresses gratitude for the gift (as is the social convention), the donor may not realise that a misunderstanding has taken place (Fennell 2002) and the damage that has been caused to their relationship, albeit unintentionally.

However, whilst there is the possibility of misunderstanding, there is also the potential for surprise and pleasure when a donor makes a particularly astute prediction about the recipient's preferences or goes to extreme lengths to source a particular item. As Fennell argues, 'A good gift is something like an act of recognition, in which the donor makes her knowledge of the recipient known to the recipient, who in turn may come to recognize something new about herself, or the donor, or the relationship' (2002: 94). Thus, the empathetic dialogue facilitated by successful gifts plays an important part in developing and nurturing significant relationships between individuals based on empathy (Fennell 2002). When gifts fail, as in the above example, it may mean that the donor is unable to identify with the recipient and empathise with their preferences, which may ultimately cause the recipient to question their compatibility.

Fennell builds on the idea that gifts can help people to determine whether relationships are worth continuing through the two concepts of signalling and screening. Following Camerer, Fennell views gifts as acting as 'powerful signals' about how the donor perceives and feels about the recipient and their intentions for the relationship between them (2002: 97). These messages are more persuasive when accompanied by a gift due to the time, money and effort which it typically requires to select an appropriate gift. In Camerer's earlier example of the two suitors, the gift of the engagement ring offered by the first suitor is generally considered a reliable signal of his love for and intention to marry the lady due to the large financial investment this gift requires. Furthermore, Fennell suggests, smaller gifts may also be used for signalling purposes.

For example, a parent might signal their acknowledgement and support for a child's musical talents by investing money in purchasing the child their own musical instrument, or a dinner guest might express their sincere appreciation for the hospitality of their host by sending a big bouquet of their favourite flowers the next day.

Gifts can also have a screening function, providing people with information to help them decide whether to continue or abandon relationships with others (Camerer 1988; Fennell 2002). The recipient of the gym membership in the example above may consider the gift to have revealed that there is limited potential for mutual identification and empathy and decide to abandon the relationship with the donor altogether. Although Fennell acknowledges that to some it may seem immature to judge relationships based on the gifts exchanged within them, the suggestion that the signalling and screening functions of gifts help people to pursue, develop and sustain relationships which are based upon mutual identification and empathy rather than expectation of return is undoubtedly valuable for this present research.

3.3.3   Gifts as generators of identity

The final perspective on gift giving to be examined in this review is that of Schwartz whose paper, 'The Social Psychology of Gifts' (1967), introduced the idea that gifts could play a role in the development and maintenance of identity. According to Schwartz, 'gifts are one of the ways in which the pictures that others have of us in their minds are transmitted' (1967: 1). He argues that, in giving a gift, the donor imposes that picture upon the recipient. Sometimes gifts serve as projections about who or what the donor would like the recipient to be, as in the case of "masculine" or "feminine" gifts to children (perhaps a football for a boy and a doll for a girl). Such gifts can be viewed as a tool of socialisation, an attempt to provide the children with the skills or knowledge necessary for them to participate in his or her society. In accepting the gift, the recipient signals their willingness to take on the projected identity and, conversely, in refusing a gift, the recipient is also rejecting the image the donor has of them. For instance, a young girl nearing adolescence may refuse the doll purchased for her by her father in order to express her lack of identification with the image he has of her as his "little girl". Or a man struggling to pay his bills may refuse his friend's offer of

financial assistance as a rejection of the identity of "charity recipient" and the power relationship such a gift would imply between the two.

In addition to imposing an identity upon the recipient, Schwartz notes that the giving of gifts also generates an identity for the donor; the act of giving is 'self-defining' (1967: 2). One way in which individuals define their own identity for others is through the presentation of that identity in objectified form, such as when men pass around cigars at the birth of their child (Schwartz 1967), the cigars acting as visual representations of the father's masculinity. Making lavish donations to charity might also be considered a way of constructing a dual identity for oneself as both wealthy and benevolent. The trend towards "I Gave" bumper stickers in the United States at the time Schwartz was writing further supports this view of charitable giving as a gesture aimed at the external projection of an image individuals have created for themselves.

This example serves to highlight the extent to which the identities of the donor and recipient are interconnected. In giving a gift of charity to another, the wealthy construct an identity for themselves as "superior" whilst at the same time imposing an identity of "inferior" upon the recipients. Those who wish to maintain their "superior" identity do their best to ensure that these debts are never repaid (Whyte 1964, cited in Schwartz 1967: 4) since recipients who are unable to reciprocate may have little option but to place themselves in a position of subordination to the donor, thereby repaying the donor with power over themselves (Blau 1964).

In this way, Schwartz notes 'gift giving plays a role in status maintenance' (1967: 2). An extreme modern example of this is the prison custom of inmates forcing other inmates to accept cigarettes or other gifts in order to secure the inmates' indebtedness and protect their own status and control (Korn and McCorkle 1954, cited in Schwartz 1967). As Osteen states, 'This is the gift as poison' (2002: 18). In making a connection between gift giving and social control, Schwartz again highlights the possibility that there exists a "dark side" to gift giving, a possibility which has gained credence over the course of this chapter. Considered particularly dangerous by Schwartz is the kind of excessive one-sided giving which occurs between parent and child since it deprives the child of the sense of self-worth which would be gained from being the source of pleasure for others, whilst also serving to preserve the status and influence of the

parent. Indeed, the suggestion that gifts may be used by donors to construct identities for themselves and recipients which help them in their pursuit of power, status or influence brings a further interesting dimension to the present study of employee recognition.

3.4   Gift giving and the workplace

There is a significant body of economic literature which applies theories of gift giving in the analysis of employer-employee relationships in the workplace. This literature mainly focuses on how generous financial compensation is interpreted as "kindness" by the employee, leading them to reciprocate by demonstrating loyalty and exerting extra effort (Dur and Roelfsema 2010). In his influential paper, 'Labor Contracts as Partial Gift Exchange' (1982), George A. Akerlof examines a case where an organisation pays its employees more than the market-clearing wage and, in turn, the employees work harder than required. This leads him to posit his fair wage-effort hypothesis: employees' efforts are dependant not only on the wage offered but also the perceived fairness of the wage. Wages which are above or below the market-clearing wage are interpreted as kind or unkind, with employees reciprocating by exerting higher or lower levels of effort respectively. Indeed, laboratory research provides substantial support for a positive relationship between wages and worker effort, suggesting that organisations should pay more than the market-clearing wage in order to induce employees to exert greater effort (see, for example, Charness 2004; Fehr et al., 1993; Fehr et al.1997). Whilst the majority of this research has been conducted in the private sector, research by Davis and Gabris (2008) found support for the application of a high wage strategy in a public sector context.

However, recent field experiments find little or no effect of paying generous wages on employees' effort levels (see, for example, Gneezy and List 2006; Hennig-Schmidt, Rockenbach and Sadrieh 2010; Kube, Maréchal and Puppe 2010b). Gneezy and List (2006) question whether it is appropriate for experimental results collected over a period of two hours to be used to make inferences about actual behaviour in labour markets taking place over a significantly longer period of time. The researchers conducted two field experiments where they attempted to maximise worker effort in two different tasks: data entry for a university library and door-to-door fundraising for a research facility. Consistent with laboratory findings, they found that, in both tasks,

subjects who were offered a gift of a higher wage reciprocated with greater levels of effort (data entered and money raised) during the early stages of the task compared to subjects who were not offered this gift. However, they observed that, after a few hours, these increased levels of effort diminished and now mirrored those of subjects in the non-gift treatment. Therefore, Gneezy and List conclude that, with the same budget, instead of attempting to induce greater effort with a gift of higher wages, more data would have been logged for the library and more money raised for the research facility by offering workers the market-clearing wage.

One explanation for the disparity between the findings of laboratory experiments and field research is provided by Dur (2009) who argues that, whilst money is the only medium of exchange in lab settings, real-life managers have access to other "socioemotional" resources which they can use alongside wages to develop social exchange relationships with their employees. These socioemotional resources are aimed at fulfilling employees' social and esteem needs and may include the manager giving the employee attention, showing an interest in their personal life, listening to their personal problems, paying them respect (Dur 2009). Dur goes on to present a signalling model of manager-employee relationships where employees care more for their manager when they are more convinced that their manager cares for them. Managers can signal how much they care about the well-being of their employees in two ways: by offering them a generous wage and by giving them attention. Contrary to Akerlof's fair wage-effort hypothesis, Dur argues that altruistic managers (managers who care about their profits and about the well-being of the employees that they hire) may offer lower wages and still build up better social exchange relationships with their employees than egoistic managers (managers who care only about profits) do. According to this model, a low wage signals to employees that the manager has other socioemotional resources to offer, which will induce the employee to offer the manager loyalty and exert high levels of effort.

The suggestion that symbolic gifts (such as attention or other non-cash gifts) rather than wages may provide a superior mechanism for the development of successful gift relations is supported by the findings of a recent field experiment to test the extent to which cash and non-cash gifts affect workers' productivity conducted by Kube, Maréchal and Puppe (2010a). The authors argue that, unlike a wage increase, non-cash gifts act as a stronger signal of kind intentions. As discussed earlier in this chapter,

illiquid (non-cash) gifts have a greater communicative potential than cash (Fennell 2002) and are often considered to be more thoughtful and personal (Caplow 1982; Waldfogel 1993). In order to test this hypothesis, they compared the effect on the productivity of subjects engaged in cataloguing library books of either an unexpected wage increase of 20% or a non-cash gift of the equivalent value (a thermos). They found that the increase in wages had no significant effect on the subjects' productivity, whilst the non-cash gift of equivalent monetary value generated a 30% increase in output on average. Furthermore, in a third treatment where the subjects were given the choice of either the wage increase or the non-cash gift of an equivalent monetary value (the value of which was also revealed to the subjects), more than 90% of the subjects chose the cash gift over the non-cash gift. Therefore, despite their strong preference for the cash gift, the non-cash gift was found to have a significantly stronger effect on the subjects' productivity than the cash gift, leading the authors to suggest that the signal conveyed by the gift rather than its monetary value determines the strength and prevalence of reciprocal behaviour.

The findings of the above studies which have applied theories of gift giving to the analysis of manager-worker relationships in the workplace are of clear value to the present research, especially those which suggest a strong role for non-cash gifts such as attention in gift exchange relationships. However, research on gift giving in workplace contexts has so far not extended in any comprehensive way to the analysis of gifts exchanged between co-workers or peers (one exception is Ruth 2004 who examines gifts between co-workers such as those to mark co-worker birthdays or retirements). This present research contributes to the growing body of literature applying theories of gift giving to the workplace by focussing both on gift relations between manager and employee and also those between co-workers.

3.5   Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored a range of different perspectives on gift giving, from the diverse fields of anthropology, sociology, economics and social psychology. Although each of the writers emphasise different concepts and motives for gift giving, the process of reviewing this literature has led me to reflect upon the many different ways of thinking about and understanding the practice of gift giving and how the insights gained might be profitably applied to the study of employee recognition. As

discussed at length in the preceding chapter, previous writers on the subject have tended to approach employee recognition as a management tool designed to reinforce desired employee behaviours, using a combination of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory as theoretical justification. However, having examined the anthropological and sociological literature on gift giving, I believe that there may be a great deal to be learnt about how employee recognition affects individuals and groups by treating it as a form of gift. This approach is in line with a growing body of research applying theories of gift giving to workplace contexts.

Throughout the chapter, I have signposted those insights from the literature on gift giving which I consider to be particularly valuable to this study's consideration of the social functions and implications of employee recognition practices. Certainly, the concept of reciprocity is central to many accounts, even those which present different motives for engaging in gift giving besides the expectation of return. If employee recognition is viewed as a gift by employees, the concept of reciprocity may be useful in explaining why individuals choose to participate in employee recognition schemes. Also valuable are the insights of Blau regarding the dual function of social exchange, to establish bonds of friendship and to establish subordination over others. The seeming incompatibility of these two functions may be helpful in explaining why some recipients react negatively to receiving recognition. Of equal use might be the related literature on recipient reactions to help, especially on the psychological state of indebtedness. The finding of this research that the personal feelings and subjective perceptions of the donor and the recipient and the relationship between them strongly influence recipient reactions to receiving help may have significant explanatory power when examining the reactions of individuals to receiving recognition.

Insights have also been gained from exploring those alternative perspectives on gift giving which emphasise other concepts besides reciprocity. The concepts of signalling and screening common to the approaches of Camerer, Prendergast and Stole and Fennell have useful applications in the context of employee recognition, suggesting that multiple meanings and messages may be conveyed through the giving and receiving of recognition, including the willingness of the donor and recipient to invest in a relationship, about how well the donor knows or does not know the recipient, and how the donor views the recipient. Furthermore, Fennell's concept of empathetic dialogue may also be usefully applied to employee recognition as a benchmark against

which the success of recognition may be evaluated. A successful act of recognition would involve both the donor and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other, the donor seeking to predict the type of recognition which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the amount of effort and thought the donor put into the selection or planning of the recognition. Also, Fennell's warning about the potential for misunderstanding in gift interactions and the consequences of these "failed" gifts has clear relevance for the study of how individuals experience and understand recognition. This thesis aims to further extend the insights derived from Fennell's model by providing further information about the conditions under which such misunderstandings are likely to occur.

To conclude, over the course of putting together this chapter, a more complex picture of gift giving has emerged than I might initially have expected. Schwartz' view of gifts as a way in which donors construct identities for themselves and recipients which help them in their pursuit of power, status or influence indicates a "darker" side to gift giving which must be considered to apply potentially to the giving of recognition. The research which follows must therefore demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which employee recognition may be used to create and maintain relationships in the workplace and convey meaning about the donor and the recipient but also as a means of establishing power or control over others.

Now that this study has been situated in relation to the existing literature on employee recognition and the new theoretical perspective offered by literature on gift giving has been introduced, in the next chapter, I will explain the research design and methods adopted in more detail.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design selected to study individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace, starting with the central research questions and including the philosophical beliefs which guide the research and the strategy of inquiry related to these beliefs. It explores the process of deciding upon methods, identifying participants and my approach to analysis, with the aim of demonstrating cohesion, from the research questions to the choices made throughout the research process.

4.2 Research questions

The development and implementation of the philosophical approach, strategy of inquiry and method adopted for collecting and interpreting empirical data aim to enable this thesis to answer the three research questions outlined in Chapter One. The following section explores each of the three research questions in turn, clarifying the ways in which each contributes to an enhanced understanding of employee recognition by addressing gaps in the existing literature which were identified in Chapters Two and Three.

4.2.1 How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?

This research question responds to an identified lack of existing literature which considers recognition schemes from the perspective of the individuals involved. The question is essentially concerned with how individuals describe and interpret their experiences of recognition in the workplace. In addressing this question, this research aims to fill a number of significant gaps in our knowledge of employee recognition, particularly around the impact of recognition on individuals and the factors which might affect their experiences of recognition. As noted in Chapter Two, very little is currently known about how recognition should be provided and what constitutes effective recognition from the perspective of employees. Thus, this question aims to uncover some of the issues which are important to employees and which determine how they make sense of the recognition they receive. Addressing these knowledge gaps is important for practitioners responsible for designing and implementing employee recognition schemes, as well as for academic researchers seeking to

understand the underlying dynamics of employee recognition as a human resource management practice.

4.2.2 What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?

This question aims to contribute to knowledge about employee recognition by diverting attention away from how it affects individuals towards its social significance, what it does for groups of employees and the organisation as a whole. The possibility that the giving and receiving of recognition may fulfil a social function in establishing reciprocal exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace was suggested by one of the interviewees in an early interview where they described giving recognition to their colleague as an investment into their working relationship from which they hoped they would eventually benefit themselves. Furthermore, in his discussion of the role recognition awards play in broader society, Best (2011) describes recognition as playing a crucial role in providing structure to people's lives and helping them to establish their place within that social world by revealing what is valued and appreciated within that social world. Thus, this question is aimed at exploring these and other possible social roles which recognition may play in the workplace, including the conditions which need to be in place for recognition to fulfil these functions and, conversely, the barriers to their successful fulfilment.

This question also responds to a small but growing body of literature which has found that there may be potential negative side-effects of recognition on recognition recipients, their co-workers, and their interpersonal relationships (Carusetta 2001; Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004; Feys et al. 2013; Henagan 2010; Mackenzie 2007; Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2010; Warren and Plumb 1999). Therefore, in addressing this question, this research also aims to contribute to knowledge about the (both positive and negative) ways in which the giving and receiving of recognition can affect the wider group of employees and under what circumstances this might happen. Given evidence of the increasingly widespread adoption of employee recognition schemes by organisations, gaining a better understanding of these potential social implications of employee recognition is of considerable importance, allowing managers to devise ways to minimise its potential negative effects and increase the possibility of employee recognition having positive social consequences.

4.2.3 What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

This question is essentially concerned with how applying theories of gift giving in my interpretation of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences may enhance knowledge about employee recognition. The question arose in response to the inability of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory, which are typically invoked as the theoretical basis for employee recognition schemes, to account for its possible social functions and implications. My review of the literature on gift giving in Chapter Three suggested that valuable insights into the ways in which employee recognition affects individuals and groups may be gained by treating it as a form of gift which plays a role in initiating social exchange relationships between individuals (Blau 1964), communicating information about the donor, the recipient and their relationship (Camerer 1988; Fennell 2002; Prendergast and Stole 2001) and the construction and maintenance of identities (Schwartz 1967). Thus, in addressing this question, this research aims to develop a deeper understanding of the social functions of employee recognition, distinct from its use as a management tool for reinforcing desired employee behaviours. Furthermore, in applying theories of gift giving to an area to which they have not previously applied, this research aims to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on employee recognition.

4.3   Research philosophy

The set of beliefs which guide this research are rooted in the Interpretivist philosophical tradition in the social sciences. Interpretivism arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a contrasting epistemology to the then-dominant philosophy of Positivism. Interpretivists share the view that both the subject matter and purpose of the social sciences are fundamentally different to those of the natural sciences and therefore a different research strategy must be adopted which reflects the difference between people and the objects of the natural sciences. For Interpretivists, the fundamental difference is that social reality has a meaning for human beings and, because their behaviour has meaning, human action is intelligible in ways that the activities of natural objects are not (Strike 1972, cited in Patton 1980). Whilst Positivists view the purpose of the social sciences as providing causal explanations of social and behavioural phenomena, Interpretivists seek to understand *why* people do

what they do by uncovering the meanings and interpretations, motives and intentions, which direct their actions.

The Interpretivist-Constructionist approach taken to this research assumes that human beings do not find or discover knowledge but actively create or construct it through social interaction (Schwandt 2003). Social reality is the product of the processes by which social actors together make sense of the world around them, assigning meanings and interpretations to their actions, the actions of others, social situations and processes as well as to natural and man-made objects. As Blaikie argues, 'Social reality is the symbolic world of meanings and interpretations. It is not some 'thing' that may be interpreted in different ways; it is those interpretations' (2000: 116).

Social Constructionist approaches are 'principally concerned with elucidating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live' (Gergen and Davies 1985: 3-4). The Social Constructionist perspective has a basis in a number of diverse intellectual traditions, including phenomenology (see Schutz 1970), symbolic interactionism (see Mead 1934) and ethnomethodology (see Garfinkel 1967). However, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* is generally regarded as responsible for the popularisation of the phase "social constructionism".

Influenced by the phenomenological approach of Alfred Schutz, Berger and Luckmann (1967) argued that all knowledge is derived from and maintained by social interactions with others using the common language needed to objectify meanings so that they can be shared. When people interact, they do so with the understanding that there is a correspondence between their respective perceptions about this world and, over time, this common sense of its reality becomes taken granted *as* reality. Berger and Luckmann call this process whereby socially constructed objective realities are internalised by individuals as their own subjective realities 'internalization' (1967: 149).

According to Berger and Luckmann, the first stage of this process occurs in childhood when a child learns words (such as water or pig) and the meanings of those words. They learn to be able to identify those things which fit in the category represented by the word as well as those which do not belong in the category. However, Berger and

Luckmann's discussion of the internalisation process was not intended to cast doubt on the view that natural objects such as water or pigs exist independently of humans but rather to stress how the meanings assigned to these things are formed through social interaction (Best 2008). For example, we know that the meanings assigned to pigs vary; some people believe that pigs are unclean animals and so refuse to eat pork in any form whilst others who do not hold this belief are happy to eat pork. Similarly, today, pigs are regarded as a symbol of good luck in countries such as China and Germany (Phillips 1951) whereas early seamen had such a deep fear of the animal that they avoided saying its name, instead referring to it as "porker" or "curly-tail" (Webster 2008). Thus, the meaning of pigs is not inherent or pre-given but a product of people, of the process of social construction.

By applying a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge and understanding, Constructionist researchers have made significant contributions to the study of deviant behaviour, gender, race, education, health, emotion, social problems and other areas (Harris 2008). However, as the number of Constructionist analyses has grown, some confusion has arisen regarding the meaning of Social Constructionism and how it should be used in sociological analysis (Best 2008; Hacking 1999; Harris 2008). Whilst the assumption that the social world is in some way created or constructed unites many different strands of Constructionist thought, researchers in various disciplines utilise the perspective for different agendas and to different ends (Harris 2008).

The assumptions which guide the present research share many similarities with the perspective referred to as "Weak" Constructionism by Schwandt (2003) and "Contextual" Constructionism by Best (2008). This branch of Social Constructionism, in the tradition of Berger and Luckmann (1967), Gergen (1994) and Potter (1996) is mute or agnostic on matters of ontology, confining itself to making epistemological claims only (Andrews 2012). As Berger and Luckmann argue in the opening to *The Social Construction of Knowledge*:

> The philosopher…is professionally obligated to take nothing for granted, and to obtain maximal clarity as to the ultimate status of what the man on the street believes to be "reality" and "knowledge". Put differently, the philosopher is driven to decide where the quotation marks are in order and

where they may safely be omitted, that is, to differentiate between valid and invalid assertions about the world. This the sociologist cannot possibly do.

(Berger and Luckmann 1967: 1-2)

Social construction is presented by Berger and Luckmann as a concept that may inform sociological analysis, not as an idea that in some way challenges the existence of a physical universe (Best 2008). As they explain, 'the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for "knowledge" in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such "knowledge" ' (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 15). Thus, for Berger and Luckmann, what is "constructed" is first and foremost the meaning of things (Best 2008).

Accordingly, the focus of this research is the meaning of employee recognition and how that meaning is constructed, rather than its ontological status. It is considered unproblematic to hold both that the meaning of employee recognition is socially constructed *and* that the concept corresponds to something real in the world (Andrews 2012). The rationale for and significance of the study is in uncovering some of the constructed meanings of employee recognition, in delving beneath the surface and exploring how individuals develop a shared understanding of what "recognition" means and maintain these shared meanings and interpretations through their continuing interaction together.

By adopting an Interpretivist-Constructionist perspective, this research takes a very different approach to the study of employee recognition to those taken in previous research, both in terms of the focus of inquiry and research methods. As discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two, there is very little existing academic research on employee recognition and the relatively few studies have been conducted have been based methodologically on quantitative analysis, identifying and assessing relationships between recognition and other variables, in particular the relationship between recognition and employee behaviour. Theoretically, this existing research has been based upon the assumption that the role of recognition in organisations can be measured in terms of its impact on aspects of employee behaviour such as productivity and attendance.

In an area such as employee recognition where very little research has been conducted, these quantitative studies certainly have their place. Data on how employee recognition interacts with other known variables such as attendance and productivity may, in principle at least, help organisations to evaluate whether these schemes are worthwhile. The collection of survey data from a large number of organisations, as in Long and Shield's (2010) study, provides us with valuable information about the incidence of non-cash recognition practices, what types of recognition practices organisations have in place and what kinds of factors predict their adoption. Furthermore, in revealing employee recognition to be an increasingly widespread practice, Long and Shields' research serves to reinforce the need for future research into this hitherto under-explored phenomenon.

However, whilst quantitative studies of this type which look at employee recognition programmes from the outside may reveal interesting patterns of behaviour, they do not offer much data to help explain why these patterns exist (Guest, Namey and Mitchell 2013). Research taking an outside perspective is unlikely to be able to explain how employee recognition programmes work in organisations or why they work that way (Miller, Dingwall and Murphy 2004). Why, for example, does an employee recognition scheme have different effects or outcomes in different organisations, or even at different sites within the same organisation? The outside perspective can obscure how the social context and the tacit knowledge, beliefs and assumptions held about employee recognition within the organisation shape the outcomes of such schemes.

By contrast, this research adopts an insider perspective on employee recognition in an attempt to address the "how" and "why" questions which are left unanswered by existing quantitative research on the topic. This study takes as its focus that which has previously been ignored by quantitative studies on employee recognition: the meanings and interpretations, motives and intentions, that are used by people in their everyday lives and which direct their actions. It aims to capture the lived experience of employee recognition from the perspective of those who have given and/or received recognition in the workplace.

The research's exploratory nature and focus on understanding the phenomenon of employee recognition by gaining access to the tacit knowledge and subjective

interpretations and meanings given to recognition by employees strongly suggested a qualitative strategy of inquiry, discussed in the following section.

4.4   Qualitative strategy of inquiry

As a genre, qualitative research has 'a long, distinguished, and sometimes anguished history in the human disciplines' (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 1). Having gained acceptance in the 1920s and 1930s as a sociological and anthropological approach to the study of group life, qualitative research was quickly employed in other social and behavioural science disciplines such as education, history, political science, business, medicine, nursing, social work and communication (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). Its applications within a wide range of diverse intellectual and disciplinary traditions mean that it is difficult to provide a clear definition of qualitative research. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some general characteristics of qualitative research which can be found in varying degrees in most qualitative studies. These include but are not limited to: a naturalistic and interpretative approach to the world; an interest in the perspectives of participants in their everyday practices and knowledge of the phenomenon under study; an emphasis on context; an inductive approach; an emergent design; and the importance of the researcher, in terms of their role as key data collection instrument and/or in terms of the reflexivity they bring to the role (Creswell 2009; Flick 2007).

The concern in qualitative research with grasping the meaning that participants give to the phenomenon or issue, rather than the meaning given to it by researchers or the views that are expressed in the literature on the subject (Creswell 2009) resonated with the epistemological assumptions guiding this research, in particular the belief that the concept of employee recognition can be understood only through understanding the meaning of the concept for those who experience it. The participants of qualitative research are regarded not as 'objects like other objects, but active sense makers like the researcher' (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 33). Thus, to understand a particular social action (such as recognition), the researcher must grasp the meanings which constitute that action (Schwandt 2003). To do this, they must start by reconstructing the primary understandings of the individuals engaged in the action or situation (Schutz 1962, cited in Schwandt 2003). As Schutz writes, 'The safeguarding of the subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee that the world of social reality will not be

replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer' (1964: 8, cited in Holstein and Gubrium 1998: 138).

4.4.1   In-depth interview method

The above assumptions provide the theoretical and epistemological justification for the use of in-depth interviewing as the primary method for understanding the processes by which individuals construct the meaning of employee recognition, and thus for understanding the lived experience of recognition from their perspective. Interviews are one of the most commonly recognised and widely used methods of generating data in qualitative research (Bryman and Bell 2007; Guest et al. 2013; Holstein and Gubrium 2004; Mason 1996; Silverman 1997). They are typically used to gain insight into some element of human experience by the researcher asking the interviewee to 'share not just the aspects of their experience that could be captured by a camera but also the aspects that can be captured only by a human being, someone who can tell you what that experience means' (Guest et al. 2013: 116).

The in-depth interview method was considered the most appropriate method of gaining access to the tacit knowledge and subjective interpretations and meanings given to recognition by employees for several reasons. Firstly, I expected that my research participants would be reasonably familiar with the interview format, and therefore more open to participating in the research. Members of the public now spend a considerable amount of time asking questions, being asked questions, watching interviews with others on television, or reading about them in newspapers (Fontana 2001). Indeed, Silverman suggested that we now live in an 'interview society', in which interviews have become part of our everyday lives (1997: 248). Secondly, the interview method would allow me to probe into participants' responses as necessary in order to obtain more detailed descriptions and explanations of their experiences, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in a way not possible with structured or closed-ended questionnaires or surveys (Guest et al. 2013).

The Constructionist approach to interviewing required me to put aside my own beliefs about what employee recognition is or should be and demonstrate sensitivity to the diverse meanings which recognition may have for the interviewees. Accordingly, the interview guide I devised in preparing for the interviews was minimally structured, specifying broad interview topic areas but not requiring that these be covered in any

particular order. I gave much consideration to the level of structure which should be incorporated into the interview guide. As Guest, Namey and Mitchell note, 'data comparability is greatly facilitated by structure' (2013: 137). One drawback of interviews which focus on individual experiences is that they are more difficult to systematically compare than other types of interviews (Guest et al. 2013). However, I felt that, given the lack of existing research exploring employee recognition from the perspective of the individuals involved and the consequent exploratory nature of the research, the lack of a fixed order to my questioning was important in order to allow the interviewee's perspective to unfold in a way that was meaningful to them, rather than be constrained by my own views (Marshall and Rossman 2006).

I started each interview by asking the interviewee to tell me what they thought about their organisation's employee recognition scheme. This question was designed to reveal their attitudes, opinions and knowledge about the scheme, providing me with a factual basis for the ensuing discussion and ideas for follow-up questions. Some interviewees were recognition award recipients, some had nominated others for recognition, some were both recipients and had nominated others and others were involved in the scheme's design or day-to-day management. I therefore asked further "descriptive" questions (Spradley 1979) depending on the interviewee's type of experience with the scheme. For instance, I asked award recipients to tell me in their own words what it was like to be recognised and I asked individuals who had nominated someone else for an award how they decided to nominate this person. I also asked both award recipients and nominators what they liked and disliked about the scheme and why, and what types of improvements they would suggest. Besides these open-ended questions, I responded to the direction each interviewee took the interview, focusing on exploring issues which were of interest and significance to the interviewee and posing additional questions in response to their comments. I closed each interview by asking the interviewee if they would like to make any additional comments about topics discussed within the interview or if there was anything that they felt was relevant which had not been touched upon.

The Constructionist approach taken in this research combines this focus on the interviewees' perspectives with the understanding that the interview is a collaborative, contextual and active process (Fontana and Frey 2005). The Constructionist approach to interviewing stands in contrast to conventional approaches which view the

interview process as 'a one-way pipeline for transporting knowledge' where the interviewer asks questions, the respondent provides answers and the interviewer's involvement is kept to a minimum (Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 143). The interview subject is assumed to have an inner or authentic self which may be revealed through careful questioning by a skilful and sensitive interviewer (Roulston 2010). This approach emphasises the importance of interviewer and question neutrality, with the interviewer who poses questions which acknowledge multiple perspectives on an issue being considered more "neutral" than the interviewer who does not (Holstein and Gubrium 2004). If unbiased, "neutral" procedures are employed successfully, it is thought that the interviewee will offer up 'the unadulterated facts of experience' (Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 145).

However, in the present research, the interview is viewed as a social setting in which the interviewee and interviewer co-construct meaning from events and experiences which the interviewee reports (Harris 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 2004; Mishler 1986; Rapley 2001). This conception of the interview as a collaborative process emphasises the meaning-making activities which take place during the interview and suggests that the interview interaction yields actively produced, contextually-bound narratives (Koro-Ljungberg 2008). Instead of treating interviewees as passive 'treasuries of information awaiting excavation' with the interviewer as 'neutral interrogator', both parties are viewed as necessarily and unavoidably active in constructing knowledge in the interview encounter (Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 141).

An early formulation of this conception of the interview as a site for the construction of knowledge rather than its mere transmission can be found in the work of Ithiel de Sola Pool (1957), a critic of public opinion polling, who writes:

> The social milieu in which communication takes place [during interviews] modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying "true" opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide that baseline'.

<p style="text-align:center">(Pool 1957: 192, cited in Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 149).</p>

According to Pool, every interview is 'an interpersonal drama with a developing plot' (1954: 193, cited in Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 149). The interview conversation can

be considered scripted to the extent that it follows a set format, has defined roles for each individual and a general topic or topics to be covered, but it also has a developing plot in the sense that interviewees' perspectives gradually unfold during the interview interaction. Thus, the Constructionist perspective regards interviewees' narratives as situated, constructed accounts of experiences produced by individuals in particular situations, rather than reports of a reality beyond the interview (Koro-Ljungberg 2008).

As Firth and Kitzinger note:

> …talk is always occasioned and produced in a context, in interaction with others- and that participants are orienting towards the questions, concerns, assumptions, interpretations and judgements of others in producing their talk. When social scientists make the methodological leap from what people 'say' to what they 'believe' or how they 'behave' they obscure the social function of talk and obscure its role as talk-in-interaction
>
> (1998: 317, cited in Rapley 2001: 308).

Understanding how the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is therefore as important as comprehending what is asked by the interviewer and conveyed by the interviewee. This dual interest in the "hows" (the context, the particular situation and people involved in the interview interaction) and the "whats" of meaning production (the issues guiding the interview, the content of the questions and the substantive information communicated by the interviewee) is part of a conscious attempt to treat both the interview process and the products generated by interviews in ways which are more sensitive to the social construction of knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium 2004).

4.5   Self-reflexive approach to the research process

This Constructionist approach to the interview process and its products clearly has implications for my role as researcher/interviewer in this study. The Positivist goal of scientific neutrality in research is dismissed as a 'myth', with researcher bias and subjectivity being considered an unavoidable and necessary part of doing qualitative research (Fontana and Frey 2005: 696). In addition to my roles as researcher and main instrument of data collection, I am 'a person, historically and contextually located,

carrying unavoidable conscious and unconscious motives, desires, feelings, and biases' (Scheurich 1995, cited in Fontana and Frey 2005: 696). My personal background, professional experiences and interests have influenced all stages of the research process. Since meaning is co-constructed by the researcher and research participants within a specific interactional context, it is conceivable that another researcher would have evoked a different kind of account.

Therefore, I felt that it was important for me to adopt a self-reflexive approach in this research in order to analyse how subjective and intersubjective elements have affected the research outcomes. According to Finlay, reflexivity in research involves the 'continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself' (2002: 532). It requires the researcher to 'have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment' (Hertz 1997: viii, cited in Pillow 2003: 178). This self-awareness during the research process aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research (Pillow 2003).

Following the advice of Finlay (2002), I attempted to engage in reflexive analysis throughout the entire research process, starting by identifying my motivations, assumptions and interests in the topic as a way of anticipating forces which might skew the research in particular directions. In Chapter One, the process by which the research questions were developed is laid bare, including a discussion of my prior experiences of employee recognition, as both a recipient and giver, and my initial reasons for wanting to study the different ways in which employee recognition is experienced and understood.

These prior experiences and professional knowledge of employee recognition presented both advantages and challenges for me in the research process. Since the focus of the study is the meanings which participants give to their experiences of employee recognition, rather than those I give to my own experiences, it was important that I did not assume that we shared the same understandings or there was the potential for me to miss where our understandings of employee recognition diverged. At the same time, I consider my professional knowledge to have been valuable since it increased my sensitivity to the data and enabled me to understand the significance of things more quickly (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Dey (1993) argues, 'To analyse data

researchers draw upon accumulated knowledge. They don't dispense with it. The issue is not whether to use existing knowledge, but how' (cited in Corbin and Strauss 2008: 33).

In a further attempt to clarify the impact of my position and perspective on the research process, I continued to engage in this process of reflection throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Following the example of Harris (2003), below I present an extract from an interview with a participant, Nicola[1], an award recipient at the public sector organisation, and reflect on how I influenced the course of the interviews.

My primary aim in interviewing was to discover what recognition means to the participants, therefore I deliberately avoided specifying, especially at the beginning of interviews, what I understood by "recognition" and instead tried to encourage the participants to describe their recognition experiences in their own words.

> *Charlotte: So, um, I'd just like to hear from you, in your own words, what it was like to be recognised…*
>
> *Nicola: I mean I felt more heart warmed that it was written about me from the person that nominated me rather than receiving the award, you know, to think somebody thought that of you was a bigger reward then actually standing up and receiving a certificate. You know that's something we could do on a more daily basis but you forget that when you are in the throes of your job. So I think that's why they sort of moved to the employee of the month as well to get us into the habit of saying yeah you have done a great job. Even better would be if we could see how the residents thought of the service that you provided, that would be more valuable than the councillors, as nice as that is. So you know how do we involve our residents who we are serving, how do we get their feedback for recognition because again the value of that would be tenfold when Mrs Goggins who I would describe as our average resident has nominated you for a*

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[1] Research participants have been given pseudonyms as a way of ensuring the confidentiality of participants but also to enable the reader to maintain a connection with each participant.

particular reason. I mean that is really heartening, that sort of thing, like thank you letters, that's a real buzz, it's a real buzz. I mean yes you do value your colleagues you work with but there are some assumptions that you are all working in the same organisation, you are all driving towards a common goal but involving the residents you actually serve, that's so much better.

By asking vaguely 'what it was like to be recognised', my intention was to allow Nicola and the other participants to discuss the details of the experience which were most important to them.

Charlotte: Ok, so you think that recognition which comes from members of the public is more valuable…

Nicola: Yeah, absolutely. Because really you know you go into work, you get into this profession for a particular reason, like I said earlier, you know, I have a real passion about sort of trying to make things better for people, that's what sort of makes me tick, that is what makes me buzz. So in receiving that directly from somebody I have tried to help that isn't within the Council the buzz is so much different- it's real. Because you know they have come with a particular conundrum, problem, issue, you have put something in place or your team's put something in place usually and something's changed as a result of that. I mean, you know you can do all the goal setting and charts and everything you want but Mrs Goggins saying thanks very much that has really helped me blah blah blah, that's what matters to me.

I could have replied in a number of different ways to Nicola's response to my opening question. I might have attempted to steer the conversation back to her own recognition experience which may or may not have discouraged Nicola from further reflecting upon how the recognition could have been made 'better' by involving members of the public. Instead, I verbally encouraged Nicola to expand upon one of her comments (the greater value of recognition from members of the public). In response, she discussed how recognition from members of the public motivates her ('makes me tick') and brings her job satisfaction.

Thus, this excerpt clearly highlights my involvement in the construction of Nicola's account. Whilst Nicola responded to my questioning in a way that was meaningful to her, the end product remains the product of a collaborative process (Fontana and Frey 2005; Harris 2003). Engaging in this process of reflexive analysis as I conducted the interviews and examined the transcripts helped me to cultivate an awareness of how I influenced the outcomes of the data collection process. As Finlay (2002) notes, although such analyses do not prove anything, they open the research process up to reader scrutiny, increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

4.6   Research organisations

Between June 2011 and November 2012, I wrote to twelve organisations of different sizes, industries and sectors which had featured in the practitioner or popular literature as having employee recognition programmes regarding allowing me access to their employees. My only criteria for inclusion in my study was that the organisation should have an employee recognition scheme which allows employees to recognise or nominate other employees for recognition. My decision to focus on peer-to-peer recognition schemes was based on my observation at the end of Chapter Two that, although previously unstudied, peer-to-peer recognition represented an interesting opportunity to study how recognition may fulfil a social function in establishing and maintaining relationships between individuals in the workplace.

As Blaikie (2000) notes, the methods used to conduct exploratory research need to be flexible and the researcher may have to be creative in order to gain access to the information required. Therefore, in my letter to potential research companies, I offered to write a short report on my findings in exchange for the organisation allowing me access to their employees. This strategy was employed in order to help create a sense of being trustworthy (Bryman and Bell 2007), although it also presented challenges, as discussed later in this chapter.

I received responses from three potential research organisations to my initial letter and meetings were held with a representative from each to discuss the research project. Of the three, one eventually decided that the timing was not right for the organisation to participate in the research since it was entering into a period of organisational change and I lost contact with a second following the announcement that the organisation had gone into administration.

However, research access to the remaining organisation, a private sector insurance company (herafter referred to as Insurer) was secured in October 2011, with interviews taking place between October and December 2011.

A second phase of letters to potential research companies in November 2012 resulted in further meetings with three potential research organisations, with research access being secured to a second organisation, a local authority in December 2012. Interviews with employees took place between January and February 2013. The time between data collection at Insurer and data collection at the public sector organisation (herafter referred to as Council X) was spent engaged in lengthy email and letter exchanges with different potential research organisations in an attempt to gain access to their employees.

It was not one of the original goals of the research project to conduct a public-private sector comparative analysis. However, following the advice of Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988) who suggest that researchers should take an opportunistic approach to fieldwork in organisations, I welcomed the opportunity to examine how the meaning of employee recognition is constructed by employees within a public sector context and explore any similarities and differences that are identified between the meanings assigned to recognition by employees in a private sector context.

Indeed, a prominent theme in the public administration literature is the distinctive motivational context in public sector institutions compared with the private (Crewson 1997; Houston 2000; Perry 1996; Perry and Porter 1982; Perry and Wise 1990; Rainey 1982, 1997; Wittmer 1991). Studies have shown that employees in government organisations have a greater interest in altruistic or ideological goals such as providing a service to society and less interest in monetary rewards compared with private sector employees (Houston 2000; Rainey 1982, 1997; Rayner, Williams, Lawton and Allinson 2011). Public sector employees have also been found to attach less importance to status and prestige than do private sector employees (Jurkiewicz, Massey Jr and Brown 1998; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991), although the respect of co-workers for the quality of one's work appears to be highly valued by employees regardless of organisational type (Wittmer 1991). Other researchers argue that public-private sector differences may not have any significant effect on employee motivation at all (Baldwin 1987). Therefore, the inclusion of public sector employees in this study

offered an unexpected but valuable opportunity to contribute to this scholarly discussion by uncovering the meanings which public sector employees themselves give to recognition awards.

The two research organisations and their respective employee recognition schemes are further discussed below. Further details about each of the schemes, particularly the nomination processes involved, are provided at the start of Chapter Five and Chapter Six respectively.

4.6.1 Insurer

Insurer is a subsidiary of a British-owned global insurance company which employed, at the time my research was carried out, around 9,100 people. The organisation has several sites in the UK with people employed in a variety of different roles including IT, HR, underwriting and customer service.

The organisation's employee recognition scheme, "Sparkle", was designed to recognise and acknowledge the role of its employees in contributing to the organisation's success. "Sparkle" is a pseudonym chosen to prevent identification of the organisation by the name of its employee recognition scheme whilst at the same time saving me from resorting to obtrusive square bracketing in the presentation of extracts from employee interviews where reference is made to the name of the scheme. To the best of my knowledge, "Sparkle" is not the name of any existing employee recognition scheme in the UK.

Launched in May 2009, the scheme has two elements: a more informal system which employees can use to send e-thank you cards to individuals who are considered to have performed particularly well, gone above and beyond what is expected from their role or helped others in some way, and a more formal process which can be used to nominate individuals for a Sparkle award which allows the recipient to choose a non-cash "recognition gift" from an online catalogue. The gifts available range from small items, such as wine or flowers, to more expensive products, such as electrical items, jewellery or experience days, or employees may choose vouchers for supermarkets and high street stores.

This recognition scheme was of particular interest to me due to the way award recipients are given the opportunity to choose their gift themselves, unlike typical gift

interactions where it is the donor's responsibility to select an appropriate gift for the recipient. Indeed, from an economics perspective, enabling recognition award recipients to select their own gifts based on their perfect knowledge of their own preferences is viewed as the most efficient gift giving solution since this avoids the inefficiencies created by the mismatch of gifts and recipient preferences (see Waldfogel 1993). I was therefore interested to explore how this design feature affects individuals' experiences of recognition, and whether the most efficient gift giving solution necessarily results in the most meaningful recognition experience for recipients.

4.6.2 Council X

Council X is a local authority providing services to around 200,000 people and which employed, at the time the research was conducted, around 7,000 people.

Two employee recognition schemes are currently in operation: an employee of the month scheme which had been running for six months and a customer service awards scheme which is in its second year. This research focused on the customer service awards scheme due to the scheme having been in operation longer and the annual awards ceremony falling around the time this research was scheduled to take place.

Launched in 2011, the customer service awards scheme, "The Excellence Awards" (again a pseudonym to prevent identification of the organisation through the name of its recognition scheme) was designed to highlight and recognise individuals and teams within the organisation who have provided exceptional customer service. Both internal (Council X employees) and external customers (members of the public) can nominate an individual or a team for an award by completing a nomination form and explaining what impressed them about the service they received. The form can be completed online via the Council X website or, alternatively, paper copies are available from various reception points and libraries around the City.

Nominations are judged by a panel of individuals drawn from across the organisation who select between three and four finalists in each category. Prior to the awards ceremony, each of the finalists is recorded talking about the service they provide and what it means to them to be nominated. At the awards ceremony, the recordings for each of the finalists in a given category are played before the winner is finally

announced. At the 2012 awards ceremony, prizes were awarded to three teams and five individuals across eight categories.

The customer service awards are funded through sponsorship and support from suppliers, partner organisations and proceeds from the Local Authority's staff lottery. Award winners receive a certificate, a trophy which is engraved with their name and displayed in their department office and high-street vouchers to the value of £25 (this value is scaled up for team awards).

The Excellence Awards scheme was of particular interest to me since it involves Council employees as well as members of the public, providing me with the opportunity to study how the identity of the donor may influence the meanings which recipients give to recognition. Furthermore, in light of literature which argues that recipients of recognition may experience a sense of discomfort as a result of outperforming others (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004; Henagan 2010; Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2010), I was interested to examine whether (and, if so, in what ways) individuals' recognition experiences may be affected when awards are scarce, thus highlighting their superior performance to others.

4.7   Sampling

With the organisations above having agreed to allow me access to their employees, the question was then how to decide which individual employees to include in the study. Although Constructionist theory in itself does not offer advice on who to sample, it encouraged me to reflect critically on my selection criteria (Harris 2003). Since the primary objective of this research is to explore the lived experience of employee recognition, top of the list of individuals to include were recognition award winners and those who had nominated them since these individuals have first-hand knowledge of the research topic.

However, a Constructionist approach requires treating *anyone* who can relate the concept of recognition to concrete experience as worthy of being heard (Harris 2003). Guest et al. (2013) emphasise the importance of seeking and presenting multiple viewpoints in order to present a more holistic picture of a research topic so recommend considering who else in the study community may have knowledge of the subject and may be able to offer a different perspective. Therefore, I also included individuals who had been nominated but had been unsuccessful in receiving an award, as well as

individuals who had been involved in the design of the schemes or in judging the nominations and/or presenting the awards to successful nominees.

Overall, the sampling approach I adopted could be described as non-probability sampling since the sampling did not involve random selection and I cannot state with any accuracy the extent to which the chosen sample represents the larger population (Bryman and Bell 2007; Guest et al. 2013). Non-probability sampling is widely employed by qualitative researchers due to its suitability in meeting the types of objectives which drive much qualitative inquiry, 'to understand common processes, shared experiences and understandings, or to identify shared cultural knowledge and norms' (Guest et al. 2013: 48). Probabilistic samples are not required to gain insight into these types of topics and, indeed, in some cases may prove harmful to the validity of a study's findings since the random selection of participants may lead to the exclusion of specific individuals who possess useful knowledge of the research topic (Guest et al. 2013). Thus, the criteria of generalisability employed in quantitative research takes on a different meaning in qualitative research where it is 'the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization' (Bryman and Bell 2007: 424).

In both organisations, I employed a form of non-probability sampling called snowball sampling in order to select participants. With this form of sampling, the researcher first makes contact with a small group of people who are felt to have knowledge of the research topic and then uses these people to establish contacts with others (Bryman and Bell 2007). This strategy was chosen as comprehensive records of past award winners and nominators were unavailable in both organisations, making the identification of potential participants difficult, particularly in Council X where the customer service recognition scheme had only been running for two years and there was a limited number of winners and nominators.

I received help from a sponsor in each organisation in identifying a small number of past winners to whom I sent a letter inviting them to participate in the research. The letter asked interested participants to contact me directly. Participants then received an information sheet which outlined the broad purpose of the research, what participation would involve and assured them that their comments would be confidential and excerpts used in any reports produced, including my PhD thesis,

would be anonymised. They were then given the opportunity to ask questions over the phone or in person. If they still wished to participate, I contacted them to arrange a date and time for the interview.

At the end of their interview, participants were asked whether they could suggest other individuals to be interviewed, possibly the person who nominated them or another award winner who might have an opinion on the issue. I then sent an email/letter to these individuals, inviting them to participate. Again, interested participants were sent the information sheet and were given the opportunity to ask questions over the phone or in person. If they still wished to participate, I contacted them to arrange a date and time for the interview.

4.7.1   Insurer

At Insurer, interviews were conducted with 18 individuals. In addition to interviewing individuals who had either given or received recognition awards or e-thank you cards, I also included team managers who were responsible for reviewing nominations received for their team and presenting awards to successful nominees. Further interviews were also conducted with individuals who were involved in the design and management of the scheme. These additional interviews with team managers and HR managers enabled me to develop a clearer understanding of how the recognition scheme was designed and operates at a practical level and gather information about the intentions and expectations of the HR department for the recognition scheme. Additionally, several of these individuals were also users of the scheme, having used it to nominate others or having received an e-card or recognition award themselves, therefore these interviews offered a valuable different perspective.

Although face-to-face interviews were conducted where possible, several interviews were conducted via telephone in order to save time and money travelling to geographically distant locations. At the request of some individuals, I conducted several telephone interviews while they were driving or travelling by train to other locations.

The research access strategy of writing a report for the organisation in exchange for access to its employees had both advantages and disadvantages for the data collection process. I found that senior managers had been briefed that this research had the sponsorship of the HR Director and therefore were more willing to participate and

recommend other potential interviewees. On the other hand, since the senior managers were aware that I was writing a report for the HR Director which might influence the future of the scheme, initially I sensed that I was being directed to individuals who it was felt could be relied upon to provide a favourable account. I also found it more difficult to gain access to non-managerial employees. I eventually overcame this difficulty by contacting the person in charge of the employee forum who was able to put me in touch with a number of non-managerial employee representatives.

4.7.2   Council X

At Council X, a total of 11 interviews were conducted with individuals who had either won an award or had nominated someone else for an award over the two years the scheme had been running. Where the award was given to a team, the interview took the form of a group interview with up to three members of that team. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the interviewees' place of work although, at the request of some interviewees, some were conducted over the telephone. As part of my research access, I was also allowed to observe the awards ceremony.

The relatively new nature of The Excellence Awards at Council X (this was only the second year that the scheme had been in operation) meant that the number of potential participants with first-hand experience of the scheme (i.e. award winners or nominators) was limited. As some of this limited number were unwilling or unable to be interviewed, the eventual number of interviewees was lower than I had originally hoped. Furthermore, although nominations can be made by members of the public, the organisation was unable to disclose their personal details for reasons of confidentiality, meaning that I was restricted to interviewing nominators who were employees. As with Insurer, I conducted additional interviews with HR managers in order to gain an additional perspective on the research topic. However, the difference in numbers of participants between Insurer and Council X and the absence of the non-employee/public perspective are acknowledged as methodological limitations.

Table 4.1 provides details of the interviewees from each organisation and shows the date and location of the interview. Participants were given pseudonyms as a way of ensuring their confidentiality but also to enable the reader to maintain a connection with each participant. I have specified whether the interviewee is a managerial or non-

managerial employee or a HR manager in order to give the reader a better sense of the context in which the individual's comments are being made. However, I have deliberately chosen to exclude information about whether the interviewees are recipients or nominators in acknowledgement that 'a single person may wear many different hats during the course of an interview' (Harris 2003: 217), giving different answers depending on whether they are speaking as an award winner, as someone who nominated someone for recognition, as a HR manager and so on.

I have also taken the decision not to include any further biographical data of the employees participating in this study. This is in response to individual anonymity requests from research participants both during and after their interviews. Further ethical considerations are discussed in the following section.

Table 4.1: Summary of interviews conducted with employees from each organisation

Insurer			Council X		
Participant	Role	Date and location of interview	Participant	Role	Date and location of interview
William	Managerial employee	October 2011; telephone interview	Jane	Non-managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room
Callum	HR	October 2011; Callum's office	Fiona	Managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room
Grant	HR	October 2011; Grant's office	Sandra	Managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room
Marie	HR	October 2011; Marie's office	James	Managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room
Miranda	Managerial employee	November 2011; Miranda's office	Nicola	Managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room
Brian	HR	November 2011; Brian's office	Gordon	Managerial employee	January 2013; telephone interview
Amy	HR	October 2011; telephone interview	Ruth and David	Managerial employee and non-managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room
Wendy	HR	October 2011; Wendy's office	Zoe, Kelly and Vicky	Managerial employee	January 2013; meeting room

				and two non-managerial employees	
Ben	Managerial employee	October 2011; telephone interview	Carrie	Non-managerial employee	February 2013; meeting room
Geraldine	Non-managerial employee	November 2011; meeting room	Yvonne	Non-managerial employee	February 2013; meeting room
Laura	Non-managerial employee	November 2011; meeting room	Matthew	Non-managerial employee	February 2013; telephone
Bob	Non-managerial employee	November 2011; meeting room			
Mick	Non-managerial employee	November 2011; meeting room			
Luke	Managerial employee	October 2011; telephone interview			
Belinda	Managerial employee	November 2011; telephone interview			
Maxine	Managerial employee	November 2011; telephone interview			
Penny	Managerial employee	November 2011; meeting room			
Julie	Managerial employee	November 2011; meeting room			

4.8   Ethical issues

As this research involves human participants, I applied for and was subsequently granted ethical approval from the University's Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS). I identified the main ethical issues facing me as a researcher as ensuring informed consent was achieved, protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of both the research organisations and the individual participants.

Organisations had given consent to speak to their employees, however participation was entirely voluntary and I sought informed consent from each participant individually. In order to ensure that all potential research participants had as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in the study, all those who responded to my letter inviting them to participate in the research received an information sheet outlining the broad goals of the research and what participation would involve and assuring them that their data would be treated confidentially. The information sheet stated that participants could withdraw from the study at any time up to a given date, after which time the data would have been analysed. In the event of a participant withdrawing from the study before the given date, their interview would not have been used in the study and the data would have been destroyed. No participants chose to withdraw from the study. At the start of each interview, interviewees were asked to read and sign an informed consent form which included a request for their permission for me to record the interview. All participants agreed to the use of the recording device.

The anonymity of both the research organisations and all individual participants was protected by giving all of the interviewees a pseudonym and referring to the two organisations as "Insurer" and "Council X". In order to ensure the confidentiality of the data, these pseudonyms were applied to each of the audio files of the interviews, ensuring that the files could only be linked to the individual by a list which was only accessible to myself. This list was kept in electronic and paper form. The electronic copy was stored on the University of York secure server, protected by a username and password combination. The paper copy was stored in a locked filing cabinet in a private office only accessible to myself in a separate file to the paper copies of the interview transcripts. Audio files were stored on the University of York secure server, protected by a username and password combination. The recordings were transcribed by myself and the audio files of the interview deleted to ensure that all identifying information was permanently deleted. From this point onwards, the anonymised interview transcripts acted as the raw data for the research.

As discussed in the preceding section, no biographical information about the research participants has been included. Given the organisations' knowledge of the identities of past winners, I took care in ensuring that comments cannot be traced back to individuals and, in the data analysis chapters which follow, any information that might

lead to the identification of individuals or organisations has been removed. Furthermore, details about the size, location, history and activities of the two research organisations have been kept deliberately minimal in this chapter in order to conceal their identities. Since the focus of the research is on individual experiences of recognition, the concealment of the organisations' identities was not considered to compromise the findings presented in the following chapters.

4.9   Data analysis

As Guest, MacQueen and Namey argue, the type of procedure used to analyse data must be consistent with the general approach taken to the research and its anticipated outcomes: its 'analytic purpose' (2012: 7). Consistent with the research's focus on uncovering the meanings individuals give to recognition in the workplace, I adopted an inductive, exploratory (thematic) approach to the analysis where I carefully read and re-read the interview transcripts, searching for key words, patterns, themes and ideas in the data (Guest et al. 2012). Inductive analysis is a process of coding data without trying to fit it into pre-determined categories and can be contrasted with deductive approaches which are driven by specific ideas and analytic categories which have been identified in advance (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Often, descriptions of the process of inductive analysis refer to themes being "discovered" or "emerging" from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). For example, Strauss and Corbin write, 'The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data' (1998: 12). Thomas similarly argues that the 'primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies' (2006: 238).

However, as Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul argue,

> ..this kind of wording can be misinterpreted to mean that themes 'reside' in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them.
>
> (1997, cited in Braun and Clarke 2006: 80)

Indeed, the language of themes "emerging" obscures the *active* role the researcher plays in the identification of themes and their subsequent analysis and interpretation, and finally their presentation to the reader (Taylor and Ussher 2001, cited in Braun and Clarke 2006: 80). In order to acknowledge and highlight the interpretative and active role I have played in the analysis of the data (and indeed at all stages of the research process) I have continued to use the personal pronoun when presenting the findings of the research in later chapters.

Although thematic analysis is a widely used analytic method across a variety of disciplines, the technique is poorly demarcated, with there being no clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how it should be done (Attride-Stirling 2001; Braun and Clarke 2006). As Attride-Stirling (2001) notes, method sections in journal articles rarely contain any detail about precisely how the researcher went about analysing their data or what assumptions informed their analysis, making it difficult for other researchers to evaluate their research or carry out similar projects in the future. Therefore, in an attempt to enhance the methodological rigour of this research, below I offer an account of the thematic analysis process, based on the step-by-step guide to thematic analysis offered by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Having made the decision to treat the data collected from each organisation as separate data sets and analyse them separately in acknowledgement of how the meaning of recognition is constructed by individuals within particular social and organisational contexts, I began the analysis process by familiarising myself with the data I had collected. I did this by transcribing the interviews and reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting down initial ideas which occurred to me. Immersing myself in the data was important at this early stage as it gave me a thorough understanding of the breadth and depth of the content which provided the basis of later analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The next phase of the process was to generate initial codes from the data. Saldana describes a code as 'a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data' (2009: 3). In practice, the process of coding involved working my way through each individual transcript and identifying important aspects which might form the basis of repeated patterns (themes) across the rest of the data set, and labelling

extracts from the interview transcripts which related to these aspects. Coding can be performed through the use of software programmes (e.g. NVivo), however I chose to code the data manually by making hard copies of the interview transcripts, writing notes in the wide margin and using different coloured highlighters to mark text which represented different ideas of interest. I am in agreement with Saldana when he writes of there being 'something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that gives you more control over and ownership of the work' (2009: 22).

The next stage was to sort the different codes into potential themes, bringing together all of the relevant coded extracts from the transcripts together within the identified themes. This involved considering how different codes could be combined under broader overarching themes, and repeatedly revising these themes until I ended up with a manageable set of significant themes which I felt reflected the meanings evident in the data set as a whole. Following the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2006), I used visual representations to help me sort the different codes into themes. These thematic maps or "thematic networks" (Attride-Stirling 2001) are presented at the start of each of the two findings chapters as a reminder to the reader that the process of coding and deciding on themes is an inherently interpretative act.

The aim of this section was to provide a transparent account of the thematic analysis process to give the reader sufficient information to fairly evaluate the findings of the research. However, the final phase of a thematic analysis is to 'tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 93). Guest et al. argue that nothing 'is more important to these ends than using verbatim quotes…They are the foundation upon which good qualitative data analysis is based' (2012: 95). Therefore, in the chapters which follow, quotes from interviewees form a crucial part of the story I tell about the data. This is consistent with the epistemological assumptions guiding this research and its primary purpose to foreground the meaning that participants give to employee recognition, rather than the meaning given to it by researchers or the views that are expressed in the literature on the subject.

4.10   Chapter conclusion

This chapter has outlined the philosophical beliefs which guide the research, the rationale for the methodological choices shaping this thesis, and provided a detailed account of the research process.

The following two chapters present my interpretations of the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences. Chapter Five presents and discusses my interpretations of the accounts of the individuals interviewed at Insurer and my interpretations of the accounts of the individuals at Council X are presented and discussed in Chapter Six.

Each of the two chapters begin with an introduction designed to orient the reader to the main findings and how they are organised within the chapter. Each of the main themes is then sequentially described, along with quotes and examples, and considered in relation to the existing literature. At the end of each theme, I summarise the main insights generated through the preceding discussion and outline the practical implications of the findings, and the chapter closes with a brief chapter summary relating the findings to the research questions guiding this thesis.

A final chapter, Chapter Seven, concludes my account of the research process and findings of this PhD study. I reflect on the research questions and how this thesis has contributed to knowledge about and theory on employee recognition. Finally, consideration is given to practical implications of the findings for organisations, before considering limitations of the thesis and concluding by identifying areas for future research.

Chapter Five:

Interpretations of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences at Insurer

5.1 Introduction

A review of the existing literature in Chapter Two identified the potential for employee recognition to be perceived as a form of gift by employees, with individuals receiving a recognition award increasing their efforts to reciprocate. Insights generated from the anthropological, sociological and economic literatures on gift giving reviewed in Chapter Three were subsequently identified as a means of illuminating my examination of employees' recognition experiences. Whilst existing research has shown that recognition has generally positive consequences for individual behaviour, empirical and theoretical insights into the social functions and implications of employee recognition schemes were found to be generally lacking. The purpose of this chapter, and the next, is to identify some of the tacit perceptions beliefs which employees hold about recognition, contributing to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees. In doing so, the chapter expands knowledge of the social functions and implications of employee recognition through applying theories of gift giving and other relevant literature in the interpretation of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences.

This chapter presents my interpretations of the accounts of employees at Insurer, separate from my interpretations of the accounts of the employees at Council X which are presented in Chapter Six. This form of presentation is for the purposes of analytical distinction and is consistent with the assumption guiding this research that meaning is constructed by individuals within particular social and organisational contexts. However, in Chapter Seven, I return to discuss similarities and differences in the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences across the two organisations and reflect on how the insights generated by this research contribute to the limited but growing literature on employee recognition.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: First, I contextualise the recognition experiences discussed in this chapter by providing further information, gained through interviews with employees who were involved in its design, about the employee recognition scheme being operated at Insurer, including the procedure for sending e-

cards and the nomination process for awards. Next, I present the findings of the thematic analysis of the transcripts of the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences. Through this analysis, I identified two main themes: 'recognition is personal' and 'you've got to give to receive'. These themes are considered to represent key perceptions and beliefs held by employees which contribute to their understandings of their experiences of recognition in the workplace and are supported with extracts from the interview transcripts which illustrate elements within the identified themes. The names of the themes are themselves direct quotations from interviewees, selected for their ability to exemplify the identified themes (Bluff 1997; Secker, Wimbush, Watson and Milburn 1995), and should help the reader to assess the face validity of the findings (Guest et al. 2012). Where appropriate, these empirical insights are discussed in relation to both the existing literature on employee recognition and the literature on gift giving. At the end of each theme, I summarise the main insights generated through the preceding discussion and outline the practical implications of the findings, and the chapter closes with a brief chapter summary relating the findings to the research questions guiding this thesis.

5.2   The employee recognition scheme

As noted in Chapter Four, in order to prevent identification of Insurer by the name of its employee recognition scheme, I have given the scheme the pseudonym "Sparkle". To reduce the use of square brackets in quotations which can potentially distract from the meaning of the original text, in any interview extracts presented below where the interviewee refers to the employee recognition scheme by name, I have simply substituted this name for "Sparkle". Any other modifications I have made to the original text are indicated in the usual way through the use of ellipsis and square brackets.

Sparkle has two elements: a more informal system where employees can send e-thank you cards to colleagues who they feel have performed particularly well, gone above and beyond what is expected from their role or helped others in some way, and a more formal process whereby employees can nominate colleagues or teams for a Sparkle award which also includes a non-cash gift. All employees are eligible to be nominated and to make nominations for a Sparkle award, and to send and receive e-thank you cards.

The e-thank you cards can be sent through logging onto the online portal on the company intranet. They are instantaneous and require no line manager approval, although the line manager may be copied into the e-thank you card. Employees are able to personalise the e-card by choosing from a selection of designs and writing a message to the recipient. The cards can be printed off and displayed if the recipient wishes. There is no limit to the number of e-thank you cards which can be sent or received. The procedure for sending e-cards is shown in Figure 5.1 below.
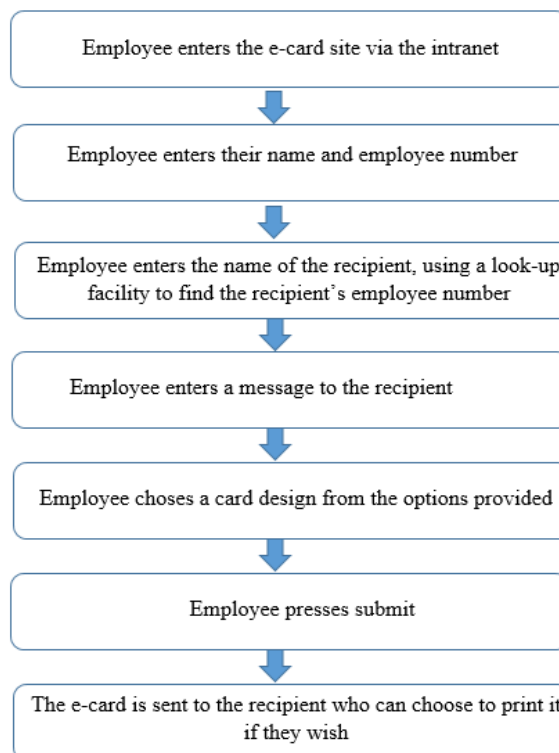
Figure 5.1: Procedure for sending e-cards

Under the more formal process, employees are able to nominate another employee for a Sparkle award by logging onto the online portal and completing an online form. Nominators are presented with a free-text box in which they can write up to 200 words, describing their reasons for their nomination. There are no strict criteria for nominations but nominators are asked to state specific actions, including examples of behaviour demonstrated by the nominee, on which they have based their decision. They are then asked to choose what they consider to be an appropriate financial value of reward from £5 up to £250. Nominations are then sent to the nominee's line manager for approval who decides whether to accept or reject the nomination and whether to adjust the reward amount to ensure consistency with other awards. For

example, a line manager who has approved an award for one employee at £20 and then gets a request for £50 for more or less the same thing may wish to reduce the value of the second award for fairness and consistency. Once they have approved the award, the line manager is given the option of a three-day delay before the successful nominee receives an email notifying them of their award. This delay is intended to encourage line managers to speak to the employee and congratulate them on their achievement in person. The line manager may override this delay. A pdf toolkit for managers is available on the Sparkle area of the intranet which includes advice and tips on how to give the recognition process "the personal touch". For example, there is an option to print off a certificate which can be personalised and either presented to the employee in front of their colleagues or delivered privately, depending on what the line manager feels the recipient would prefer.

Once successful nominees have been notified of their award by email, they are able to log onto an online rewards catalogue and choose their gift based on the amount of money they have been given. The gifts which are available range from small items such as wine or flowers to more expensive products such as electrical items, jewellery or experience days. Employees may also choose vouchers for supermarkets and high street stores or to "save up" to purchase a more expensive gift at a later date. The nomination process from start to finish is shown in Figure 5.2 below.
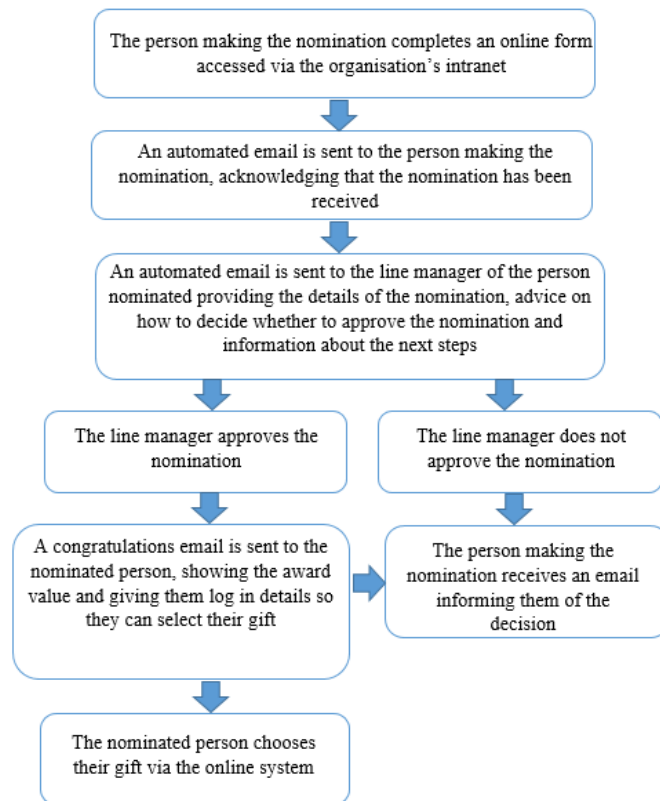
Figure 5.2: Sparkle award nomination process

5.3 Findings of thematic analysis

As discussed in greater detail in the preceding chapter, I have taken an inductive, thematic approach to the data analysis in this study. I carefully read the transcripts of the interviews conducted with employees at Insurer and identified codes which indicated different ideas of interest and captured the richness of the employees' experiences of employee recognition (Boyatzis 1998). Using a thematic map (Braun and Clarke 2006) or thematic network (Attride-Stirling 2001), I sorted these codes into two main themes, as shown in Figure 5.3. The themes which I have identified through this analysis process have been named using quotations from interviewees and represent perceptions and beliefs held by employees which contribute to their understandings of experiences of recognition in the workplace: 'recognition is personal' and 'you've got to give to receive'.

The first theme 'recognition is personal' encapsulates several different but related beliefs held about recognition by the interviewees including a preference for personalisation and a belief that recognition represents a form of message sent by one

individual, filtered through another, and interpreted by the recipient within a particular interpersonal context. The second theme 'you've got to give to receive' is defined by the interviewees' shared understanding of recognition as being governed by a social exchange framework in which the giving and receiving of recognition can generate potential benefits not just for the recipient but also for the donor and other parties.
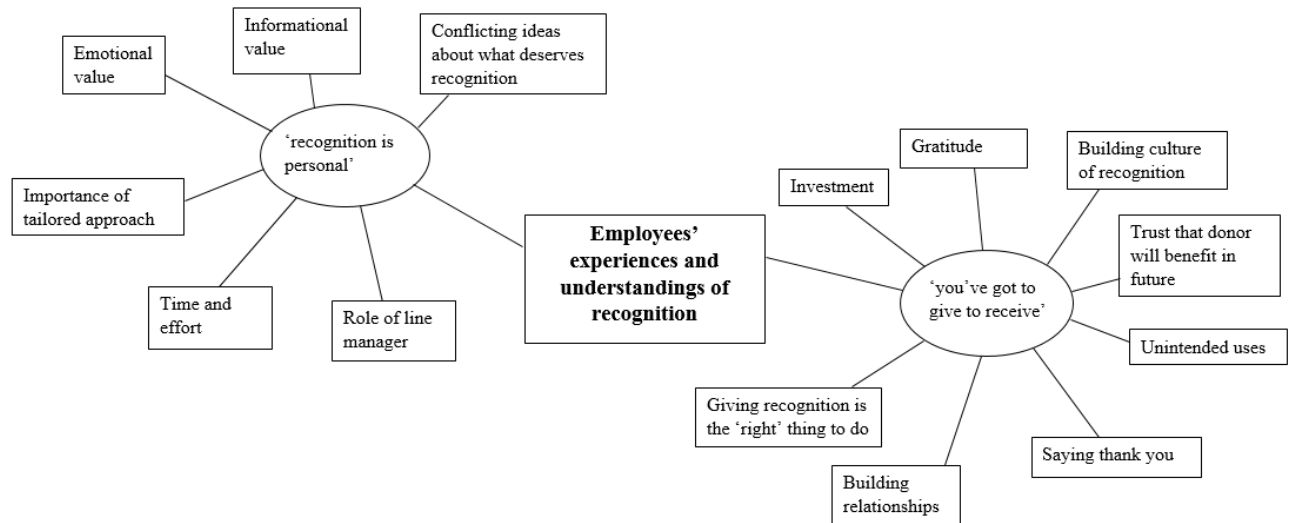
Figure 5.3: Thematic map showing two main themes identified in transcripts of interviews with employees at Insurer

5.3.1   Theme one: 'recognition is personal'

This theme encapsulates several different but related perceptions and beliefs held by the interviewees about recognition: what it is and what it should be. Noticeable across all of the interviewees' accounts was an appreciation that individuals have different preferences about the form they would like recognition to take. This awareness is particularly evident in **Amy's** response to my first interview question, 'What do you think about the recognition scheme?'

> *Amy: ...what I'm like finding I do like about the thing, is I think the thing with the recognition, it's such a personal thing, so if you give everybody a bottle of wine well that may not work for everybody. Or equally if you gave everybody a voucher for Marks and Spencers, that may not work for everybody. The fact that you've got flexibility in that people can go online*

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and people can choose personally what would work for them. Otherwise,
I think that would be a big difficulty with deciding how we recognise
people, because recognition is personal.

The ability for Sparkle award recipients to choose their gift themselves is therefore viewed as an advantage of the recognition scheme since it allows them to select something which appeals to them personally rather than being given something which has been chosen because it is assumed to be desirable to a large number of people (such as the bottle of wine or Marks and Spencers vouchers). Indeed, economists would argue that allowing individuals to select their own recognition gift is a good option since this avoids the inefficiencies created by the mismatch of gifts and recipient preferences. Research by Waldfogel (1993) found that people typically like the gifts others buy for them between 10 per cent and a third less than the items they buy for themselves. Therefore, enabling recognition award recipients to select their own gifts based on their perfect knowledge of their own preferences is viewed as the most efficient gift giving solution.

Amy's repetition of the word 'personal', first to convey her appreciation that the same gift will not 'work for everybody' and then in reference to how the individual is given the agency to 'choose personally', indicates that Amy's understanding of recognition as 'personal' is closely related to her belief that award recipients should be given the 'flexibility' to select their own recognition gifts. Thus, for Amy, it is the recipients themselves who make the recognition personal through their gift selections.

However, for other interviewees, the word "personal" was considered to have a different meaning in relation to employee recognition, instead referring to a special form of interaction between two individuals where one shines the spotlight on the other in order to highlight desirable behaviour or specific accomplishments. In **Penny's** account below, she describes how her manager nominated her for a Sparkle award and sent her a personal email explaining his reasons for nominating her.

Charlotte: So you said you'd received some [awards] too. Could you tell
me a little bit about that?

Penny: Well, a recent one that I received was for [a project submission].
So what we did, we sat in a room for an hour, brainstormed what we'd

done. And then my role, if you like, was put it all together, turn it into the final product. So my team manager sent me an actual Sparkle award for that. Which reminds me, I've still not logged on and claimed my reward. But the actual email he wrote me, it's posted on my board, I look at it every day. So, in that case, it's the message that's important, more than me actually logging on and finding out how much money I've got and where I can spend it. I know he's got lots on his plate so I was touched that he took the time to stop and write to me personally saying thank you and that he could see the work that had gone in. It makes me feel special, like he's noticed that I'm good at what I do.

Thus, for Penny, what makes the recognition personal is that her manager 'took the time to stop and write to [her] personally' to thank her for the work which she had put in to the project submission. In focusing on her and the work she had done, the manager's email made Penny feel 'special' and 'noticed' and she has displayed the email on her notice board so she can 'look at it every day' as a reminder of how '[she's] good at what [she does]'. That the manager was very busy yet had 'taken the time to stop and write to [her] personally' gives the recognition extra impact as it conveys to Penny that he was so impressed by her work that he prioritised giving her recognition for it. Therefore, here, it is the manager who has made the recognition experience personal to Penny through 'personally' taking the time to compose an email, in addition to the automated email sent to recipients which is generated through the recognition scheme itself.

As well as having an emotional value for Penny (she is 'touched' by the personal gesture of thanks from her manager), the award has an informational value (telling her that her work is of a good standard and that she is valued by her manager). Penny's admission that she has 'still not logged on and claimed [her] reward' contrasts starkly with her treatment of the email sent to her by her manager which she has printed out and displayed on her notice board. The 'memory-value' (Rose 2011: 9) the email from her manager provides and the high level of importance Penny attributes to it is consistent with the work of Best (2011) who argues that, for the recipients, recognition awards symbolise the esteem of others. Every day when Penny looks at the email displayed on her notice board, she is reminded of the high esteem in which she is held by her manager.

Her comment 'it's the message that's important' suggests that, for Penny, the recognition performs a communicative function, conveying how the manager perceives her and his willingness to invest time and effort in developing a positive working relationship with her. According to Schwartz, 'gifts are one of the ways in which the pictures that others have of us in their minds are transmitted' (1967: 1). The role of gifts in communicating meaning is also suggested by signalling models of gift giving (Camerer 1988; Fennell 2002; Prendergast and Stole 2001) which view gifts as actions which convey information about how the donor perceives the recipient and their intentions for the relationship between them. As with gifts, these types of messages are more persuasive when accompanied by recognition award because of the time and effort required to nominate an individual for an award.

Furthermore, as Schein (1992) argues, the issues which leaders pay attention to, measure and control send a powerful message to other organisational members about the types of behaviour valued by the organisation. Thus, the employee recognition scheme more broadly may be considered a mechanism for the organisation to influence the values and behaviour exhibited by its employees. The manager acts as an agent of the organisation, reinforcing these values and assumptions about what constitutes organisationally desirable behaviour through his own personal qualities and actions, such as the email he 'personally' sent to Penny outside of the formal scheme.

However, as Camerer (1988) notes, gifts convey information about the intentions of not just the donor but also those of the recipient. By accepting the recognition award and expressing pleasure and a sense of gratitude towards her manager, Penny signals her willingness to comply with the relationship dynamics established by the manager's act of recognition and to accept his perception of her as accurate (Schwartz 1967). In reality, the recognition award was a gift Penny could not easily refuse. However, in displaying the email from her manager on her notice board where she can 'look at it every day', Penny signals not only her acceptance but also her endorsement of the manager's perception of her. Thus, the email simultaneously acts as a visual reminder to Penny to conform to the professional image imposed upon her by the manager and a symbol of her endorsement of the values and assumptions of the organisation.

Signalling models of gift giving assume that gift giving typically involves two components: (i) the donor searches for an appropriate gift for the recipient and (ii) the donor purchases and gives the gift to the recipient (Prendergast and Stole 2001). However, the employee recognition scheme at Insurer is purposefully designed so that the recognition gift itself is chosen, not by the individual nominating the individual for recognition, but by the recognition recipient themselves. At first glance, this design feature constrains the application of signalling models of gift giving to the study of employee recognition within this organisational context. The donor's involvement in selecting the gift is a key component of both Camerer (1988) and Prendergast and Stole (2001)'s signalling models. Similarly, for Fennell (2002), the donor's act of putting themselves in the place of the recipient and attempting to decide what kind of gift the recipient would like to receive from this particular donor is central to her concept of "empathetic dialogue".

However, in this organisational context, the issue of what constitutes the gift is more complex. Instead of one item selected by a single donor, the gift is the whole recognition experience, including the act of nomination by the donor, the way the award is communicated, personalised and presented by the line manager and the gift which the recipient selects for themselves. Thus, as explored below, although the nominating individual is not involved in selecting the award gift for the recipient, signalling models of gift giving still have some explanatory power when extended to incorporate the role of the line manager in communicating and presenting the award to the recipient.

Indeed, a third sense in which interviewees understood recognition as "personal" is expressed through their strong preference for the recognition experience to be tailored to individuals by their line manager. Although **Belinda** was pleased that her director came to speak to her when she was given a recognition award, as a line manager herself, she understands that this approach would not be appropriate for everyone.

> *Belinda: I don't think it's a case of one size fits all... And the line manager has to understand the individual to understand what kind of recognition will work for them. Because some people wouldn't like the director of the company to walk up to their desk in the middle of the day and speak to them, and then thank them for a good piece of work they've done, because*

it would frighten the life out of them, because they're not used to dealing
with the director.

In stating that recognition is not 'a case of one size fits all', Belinda suggests that individuals have different preferences for the type of recognition they receive and the way that recognition is delivered. Some individuals would not find being singled out by a high-status individual such as the director at all enjoyable; instead, it 'would frighten the life out of them'. To make an informed decision about how best to deliver recognition which is meaningful for the recipient, Belinda argues that a line manager needs to get to 'know the individual' and what personally motivates them.

Indeed, this belief is consistent with the 'existential' approach to employee recognition discussed by Brun and Dugas which is concerned with 'recognition of the person as a dignified, equal, free, and unique being who has needs' and, as they argue, should serve as a foundation for all other recognition practices (2008: 727). This existential approach to recognition was identified in the accounts of several of the interviewees who discussed their experiences of taking the needs and preferences of the individual recipient into account when deciding how to deliver recognition. In the below extract, **William** describes how he delivered a recognition award in a way which demonstrated his respect and consideration for the recipient as an individual.

> *William: There was one… when I was the manager in …, one chap did*
> *some really good work, we won a £1.5 million deal over 3 or 4 years. And*
> *if it wasn't for him we would not have done that deal. And he got £100, or*
> *something like that. And what I did is I stuck the certificate in an envelope*
> *and I put it on his desk. Because he did not want, he would be absolutely*
> *mortified for people to notice that he was getting something like that. But*
> *actually, putting it in an envelope and doing is discreetly, gave it even*
> *more impact because, he actually said to me later, that he was glad that I*
> *knew him so well, I got that he would have hated a fuss.*

According to Camerer (1988) and Prendergast and Stole (2001), gifts can be used to signal how much the donor knows about the recipient's preferences. If the recognition experience itself is viewed as a gift, this suggests that line managers can signal how well they understand the recipient through their choices about how they deliver

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recognition. Although, to an outsider, William's decision to '[stick] the certificate in an envelope and…put it on [the recipient's] desk' without comment may seem to be dismissing the recipient's achievement, William understood that the recipient would be 'absolutely mortified' if William had drawn attention to his award by presenting it to him in front of his colleagues. The recipient later expressed his pleasure that William had delivered the recognition 'discreetly' as it showed him that William 'knew him so well' and understood that he 'would have hated a fuss'. Thus, the way William presented the recognition imbued the award with an additional meaning, giving it 'more impact' because it conveyed to the recipient both that his work was appreciated and that he was recognised as an individual by his line manager.

Again, this example highlights the communicative function of recognition to convey information about how well a donor (in this case, the line manager) understands the recipient and their preferences. The recognition experience described by William can be considered an example of what Fennell (2002) terms "empathetic dialogue". According to Fennell (2002), empathetic dialogue may be facilitated through the special form of communication brought about through gift giving when a donor puts themselves in the place of the recipient to determine what the recipient would most want to receive from this particular donor and the recipient envisages the donor's empathetic efforts in selecting the gift (Cheal 1988, cited in Fennell 2002). Thus, the recognition experience described by William may be judged successful by Fennell as it involved both William and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other: William seeking to predict the type of recognition which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the thought William put into his choice of how to present the recognition. This special "empathetic" form of communication facilitated through the giving and receiving of recognition is considered to strengthen and maintain the relationship between William and the recipient through the fulfilment of individuals' desires to identify with another and to have one's true preferences understood by them (Fennell 2002).

However, Fennell notes, there is the potential for gifts to fail if either the donor is unable or unwilling to identify with the recipient and empathise with their preferences and/or the recipient fails to envisages the donor's empathetic efforts in selecting the gift. In the event of this happening, the recipient could consider the gift to have revealed that there is limited potential for mutual identification and empathy, leading

them to abandon the relationship with the donor altogether. Applied to the presentation of recognition by the line manager, this suggests that, if the line manager fails to identify with the recipient and empathise with their recognition preferences, the recognition will be unsuccessful, as illustrated by **Bob's** description of his recognition experience leaving him 'cold'.

> *Bob: Well I got one where the automated email saying I'd got an award came through but my manager never came to speak to me personally. The whole thing left me a bit cold to tell you the truth. I haven't spent my money, I haven't worked out how to, it all seems a bit too much effort to be honest with you.*

The failure of the manager to 'personally' speak to Bob left him feeling 'cold' about the recognition experience. Consequently, he is unenthusiastic about selecting a gift with the money he has been allocated. It is assumed that the manager either forgot to speak to Bob about his award or mistakenly believed that, like the recipient in William's account, that Bob would rather the manager did not make a fuss. Nevertheless, the manner in which the award was communicated to Bob through the automatically generated email conveys a lack of identification with Bob's recognition preferences and him as an individual on the part of the manager. Bob's apathetic attitude towards selecting a gift with the money he has been awarded ('it all seems a bit too much effort') may be considered a reaction to the manager's own unwillingness to invest time and effort in their relationship which was signalled by their failure to speak to Bob and congratulate him on his award. In communicating information about the manager's lack of identification with Bob's preferences, this failed act of recognition may also serve as a screening mechanism which discourages the continuation of relationships where there is limited potential for mutual identification and empathy between the two parties (Camerer 1988; Fennell 2002). This could lead Bob to question his compatibility with the manager and, if the manager's attitude is considered representative of the values and assumptions of the organisation about recognition, he may even contemplate finding alternative employment.

Bob's experience was unique within the interviewees' accounts of their recognition experience but I have included it here in order to highlight the important role played

by line managers in mediating recipients' experiences of recognition and the potential implications of failed acts of recognition.

Indeed, an awareness of the central role performed by line managers in delivering recognition in a way that is meaningful for each individual was expressed frequently by the interviewees, particularly by those in line managerial positions themselves who frequently referred to this as 'just good people management'. As Schwartz notes, gifts do not just generate identities for recipients; the act of giving is 'self-defining' (1967: 2). Thus, tailoring recognition in a way that is meaningful for each individual is one of the ways which line managers construct their own identities as 'good people manager[s]'. In the below account, **Julie** externally projects the image of herself as a 'good people manager' which she has constructed for herself through getting to know her team as people and adapting her recognition approach to fit their individual recognition preferences.

> *Julie: I just think it's about being a good people manager really. So for me personally as a manager, the most important thing is knowing what recognition means to the individuals in my team. So I know that there's one chap that, no matter how many Sparkle awards, no matter how many e-cards, how many goodies from the cupboard, it just doesn't float his boat. But if I give him that personal recognition, you know just actually take the time to have a conversation one-to-one with regard to talking through what he's done, and the value that that had, and hopefully if the genuine thank you feeling comes through, that does it for him.*

Here, Julie indicates that she considers a crucial part of role as a manager to be 'knowing what recognition means to the individuals in [her] team'. She describes how Sparkle awards, e-cards and 'goodies' from a cupboard have little significance for an individual in her team: 'it just doesn't float his boat'. However, she says, she knows that what 'does it for him' is for Julie to 'take the time to have a conversation one-to-one' with him about what he's done and for him to experience a 'genuine thank you feeling'. Like the manager in Penny's account, Julie makes the recognition 'personal' by putting aside time specially to focus solely on that individual and shine a spotlight on their achievements. By referring to a specific piece of work the individual has done or specific behaviours they have exhibited and describing the 'value' these have had,

Julie attempts to convey sincerity which she hopes will result in the individual experiencing a 'genuine thank you feeling'. Indeed, the importance of recognition being experienced as genuine was identified in the accounts of several interviewees. The reasons for and implications of this finding are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter in relation to theme two.

The importance of managers using 'socioemotional' resources at their disposal such as the manager giving the employee attention, showing an interest in their personal life, listening to their personal problems and paying them respect is suggested by Dur's (2009) signalling model. The model is based on the assumption that employees care more for their manager when they are more convinced that their manager cares for them. According to Dur, managers can signal how much they care about the well-being of their employees through the use of these socioemotional resources which are aimed at fulfilling employees' social and esteem needs. They can be used by managers alongside wages to develop social exchange relationships with their employees. The role of recognition in the development of social exchange relationships is considered in greater detail in the discussion of theme two.

Although the importance of the line manager in tailoring recognition to the individual recipient was broadly acknowledged by the interviewees, some interviewees' accounts highlighted less favourable consequences of line manager involvement in the Sparkle award process. Often, these less favourable consequences occurred as a result of the perceived encroachment of the line manager on what was considered a 'personal' interaction between donor and recipient.

> *William: It's a very personal thing isn't it, between the person that's nominated it and the person receiving it. And then you introduce another person who's in charge of whether it actually goes through, I think some managers find that quite hard. I mean, they're told the reason [for the nomination] but they're too detached from the actual act to fully grasp the significance for the person nominating.*

Here, William presents the line manager in the recognition process as an outsider, introduced to preside over what is perceived as being a 'personal' interaction between two individuals: one nominating and another receiving the recognition. He states that

the manager is 'too detached' from the action for which an individual is being nominated to 'fully grasp the significance' for the nominating individual. Thus, for William, it is the reasons which the nominating individual has for nominating another individual which make the recognition process personal, since these are specific and particular to those two individuals.

The potential for the line manager's involvement to have unfavourable consequences on the recognition experiences of the nominating individual and intended recipient is illustrated by **Bob's** account of an instance of where the line manager had decided not to approve a nomination for a Sparkle award.

> *Bob: I know of one colleague who got, working on a project, and she got nominated for a Sparkle award. And it was significant, it was £50. And her manager said no. Now that Sparkle award was delivered, or offered, by the person in the project group she was working with, because it meant something to them, whatever she'd done. The manager said no because it was part of their everyday job. But actually it wasn't. So my colleague knew about the nomination because the person that nominated had told her and so, when the email didn't arrive, she questioned the manager who said "no, you're not getting that" and it was tense between them for ages afterwards.*

In rejecting the nomination, the line manager made a judgement that the action or behaviour in question did not warrant special recognition because they considered it to be 'part of [the nominated individual's] everyday job'. By effectively superseding the nominating individual's personal judgement about the would-be recipient's contribution, the line manager ignores that the would-be recipient's behaviour when working on the project 'meant something' to the nominating individual. Indeed, by refusing to approve the nomination for recognition, the manager signals their own lack of appreciation for the would-be recipient. Furthermore, since the would-be recipient was aware that they had been nominated, the manager is perceived as having taken something away was rightfully theirs, causing tension between the two.

This example serves as a reminder that the Sparkle employee recognition scheme formalises an inherently personal social process of acknowledging a person's contribution, performance, dedication or engagement (Brun and Dugas 2008) with the

addition of an extra layer of managerial control intended to ensure fairness and consistency of approach. Inevitably, individuals' attitudes and actions in relation to the scheme are influenced by their personal beliefs and attitudes towards recognition, for example, what types of behaviour are deserving of extra recognition and how recognition should be given. Sometimes individuals' personal beliefs about how recognition should be delivered work in harmony with and even enhance the formal scheme, as in the case of William and Julie where their personal belief that it is their responsibility as 'good people manager[s]' to know the recognition preferences of the individuals in their teams results in them delivering recognition in a way that is meaningful for each individual.

However, at other times, the formal scheme can highlight and exacerbate the conflicting beliefs and attitudes individuals may hold about recognition and in particular what types of behaviour are deserving of recognition, with negative consequences. This can be seen in Bob's account where the nominating individual and the would-be recipient's line manager held different opinions about the types of behaviour warranting recognition. In this instance, the negative outcomes of the nominating individual using the formal scheme to recognise the would-be recipient outweighed any potential benefits delivered to any of the parties involved. Indeed, the nominating individual could have reasonably concluded that it would have been more beneficial to dispense with the formal scheme entirely and instead say thank you to the individual in person or by email. It is apparent, therefore, that, although in some circumstances individuals can enhance the recognition facilitated through formal recognition schemes through expressing their own personal attitudes towards and informal approaches to recognition, in other interpersonal contexts, formal employee recognition schemes may not always work in synergy with individual personalities and different perspectives on and approaches to recognition.

5.3.1.1 Theme one summary/discussion

This discussion of the theme 'recognition is personal' has highlighted a number of important perceptions and beliefs held by interviewees about what recognition is and how it should be provided, as well as suggesting several social functions fulfilled by employee recognition. Firstly, the interviewees' accounts indicate that, within this organisational context, the employee recognition experience is made up of multiple

elements, each having different meanings for and values to the recipient. These structural elements are: the actual act of nomination by the donor, which had both informational and emotional value to the recipient; the communication of the award by the line manager, which conveyed information about the line manager's perception of them, their intentions for their relationship and how well the line manager understood them as an individual and their recognition preferences; and the recognition gift itself which recipients valued being able to choose for themselves.

As a consequence of the scheme design, the role and influence of the nominating individual within the recognition experience is limited, with the line managers being given the main responsibility for judging nominations and communicating recognition awards to successful recipients. This design feature was reflected in the way the interviewees tended to foreground the way the recognition was communicated or delivered to them (or not) by their line manager within their accounts of their recognition experiences, emphasising the central role played by the line manager in mediating their experiences of recognition. The interviewees expressed a strong belief that recognition should be made personal to them as individuals and that the line manager should take the needs and preferences of the recipient into account when communicating the recognition award.

The application of signalling theories of gift giving to the interviewees' accounts suggests that, beyond its use as a management tool to reinforce organisationally desirable behaviours, the giving and receiving of employee recognition has a communicative function to convey information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition. The interviewees' accounts suggest that recognition may be used to signal multiple messages to the recipient simultaneously, including how the nominating individual's perceives the recipient and their willingness to invest time and effort in their relationship, and how well their line manager identifies with them as an individual and can accurately predict their recognition preferences. Additionally, through their acceptance or rejection of the recognition award (whether this be overtly or covertly), recipients may signal their acceptance or rejection of the donor's perception of them and the donor's intentions regarding the relationship between them. The social utility functions of the information conveyed through the giving and receiving of recognition were explored through Fennell's (2002) concept of empathetic dialogue. The role of recognition in

helping to develop and sustain significant relationships between individuals based on mutual identification and empathy and conversely in "screening out" relationships where the capacity for empathetic dialogue is lacking was illustrated through examination of interviewees' accounts of both successful and unsuccessful acts of recognition.

A broader finding discussed in relation to the theme of 'recognition is personal' concerned the ways in which the informal recognition approaches of individuals, particularly line managers in this organisational context, were found to mediate recipients' experiences of the recognition facilitated by the organisation's formal recognition scheme. The most important practical implication of this finding is that it suggests that the social and organisational contexts to which formal employee recognition schemes are applied play an important part in determining how the schemes are experienced by employees. Whilst HR departments typically design such schemes, most rely on line manager involvement and support, therefore employees' recognition experiences are liable to be influenced by the manager's own attitudes and approach to recognition and the quality of the relationship between the line manager and employees.

This finding concurs with existing research conducted by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) which suggests a symbiotic relationship between line managers and the application of HR practices, and which applies research and theory on social exchange and perceived organisational support to explore why the behaviour of line managers is so important to employee attitudes. Work on perceived organisational support is based upon the central assumption that employees develop a general perception concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being and this perceived organisational support increases employees' felt obligation to reciprocate through higher levels of organisational commitment and lower levels of absenteeism (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson and Sowa 1986; Eisenberger, Stinglhamer, Vandenberghe, Sucharski and Rhoades 2002). Since line managers are viewed as agents of the organisation, employees are likely to view their line manager's favourable or unfavourable treatment of them as indicative of the organisation's support (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Kottke and Sharafinski 1988; Levinson 1965). Therefore, the quality of the relationship between the line manager and employees contributes to employees' perceived organisational support and

consequently influences employees' levels of organisational commitment and attitudes towards the organisation (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). This suggests that organisations committed to improving organisational performance through people management should pay particular attention to the recruitment, selection, training, appraisal, socialisation and development of their line managers since 'it is people management, not just HR practices, which, through employee reciprocal behaviour, impacts on organisational performance' (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007: 17).

The interviewees' understandings of the role of reciprocity in relation to the giving and receiving of recognition and the potential social functions served by such reciprocal behaviour are further explored and discussed in the next section in relation to the second theme: 'you've got to give to receive'.

5.3.2   Theme two: 'you've got to give to receive'

This theme centres on the understanding, expressed in the majority of interviewees' accounts, that the giving and receiving of recognition can generate potential benefits not just for the recipient but also for the donor and other parties. In the interview extract below, **Marie** discusses the social rewards which she received as a result of nominating her colleagues for recognition awards.

> *Marie: So I recently did some work with a group of people across a number of different areas, but we all had a common purpose. And they did a really good job, and this was something which was over and above their normal job. So I used that scheme to give them an award, and generally say thank you. It was a real positive response. I think most, if not all of them, actually came back through a separate email and were saying, thank you so much, it's really appreciated. So it gives me a nice feeling, you know, to get a thank you for saying thank you! And I thought it was just a good thing to do. I know now that if there does come a time when I need something, we already know each other and we have this good relationship so I'll feel it'll be easier to pick up the phone.*

Marie's belief that through nominating her colleagues for recognition awards she has created a 'relationship' with each individual which will make it easier for her to 'pick up the phone' and ask for help in the future is consistent with the assumptions of Blau's

(1964) social exchange theory that social interaction is motivated by self-interest. The term 'social exchange', as Blau uses it, refers to 'voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do bring from others' (1964: 91). For Marie, the gratitude she received from her colleagues for nominating them was itself a social reward which made the giving of recognition enjoyable ('it gives me a nice feeling…to get a thank you for saying thank you!') Furthermore, the giving and receiving of recognition creates a sense of goodwill between Marie and her colleagues which she may be able to exploit in the future for her own benefit.

Although Marie does not state it explicitly, she implies that, if she was to 'pick up the phone' to one of the colleagues who she had nominated for recognition and ask them for help, they would be obliged to comply with her request. This presupposes the existence of some moral norm which compels Marie's colleagues to reciprocate in kind for the recognition they have received. In Gouldner's account of the role of reciprocity in social life, he argues that a general norm of reciprocity 'evokes obligations towards others on the basis of their past behavior' (1960: 170). Individuals are compelled to fulfil these obligations because they share the same moral norm of reciprocity which entails that 'You *should* give benefits to those who give you benefits' (1960: 170; original emphasis).

Furthermore, interviewees' accounts suggest that this moral norm may influence not just the behaviour of recognition recipients but also motivate the act of giving of recognition itself. Contrary to my assumption that the giving of recognition represented the first "move" in the social interaction between donor and recipient- the first gift which compels the recipient of the recognition to reciprocate- many interviewees considered the giving of recognition to be itself a form of repayment for the help or support which that individual had provided to them. For example, in the account below, **Maxine** explains how, at the end of the year, she invites her team out for a drink to say thank you for their work throughout the year.

> *Maxine: I see it as I delivered, so I'll get a bonus or I'll get a pay rise, because my team delivered. And therefore I owe them a little bit of something. So here's how I'm going to say thank you. Usually we'll go somewhere and I'll buy a few bottles of bubbly from behind the bar. That's*

me saying thank you, for delivering. They're helping me then get recognition for leadership so it's only right I give them that recognition too…Those few bottles always go down massively well. And that little investment in the team can have a big impact, you know, extra commitment to the job.

Maxine acknowledges that, as a consequence of her team 'delivering' on the goals and objectives she set, she will receive a bonus or pay rise and 'recognition for leadership'. Therefore, she feels she 'owe[s] them a little bit of something'. Her expression 'it's only right' suggests her decision to purchase bottles of champagne for the team is motivated by a felt moral obligation to pay them what she 'owe[s]'. Thus, the bottles of champagne both act as a symbol of her appreciation and thanks for the contributions of her team and represent a way of her repaying the debt created by her team's hard work.

However, Maxine concurrently considers the bottles of champagne to be an 'investment in the team', suggesting that, although the bottles are themselves a repayment for the debt Maxine 'owe[s]' to the team, they also create a further debt to be repaid by the employees through 'extra commitment to the job'. Indeed, according to Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, the reason Maxine reciprocated the benefits she received as a result of the team's hard work was so that they would continue to work hard and she would enjoy further benefits. As he argues, 'it is a necessary condition of exchange that individuals, in the interest of continuing to receive needed services, discharge their obligations for having received them in the past' (1964: 92).

The way in which individuals' felt need to reciprocate interacts with self-interest concerns to influence their decisions to engage in the giving of recognition is further illustrated by **Laura's** account of how she decided to send an e-thank you card to her colleague.

Laura: I just thought it's the right thing to do… I personally want to receive recognition for things that I've done, so in the same way that if someone has done something special for me, or has gone the extra mile for the team, obviously then I do send them myself. It's all about building that culture of recognition because I think getting a card yourself makes

you stop and think about how you could say thank you to other people more, so as more and more people receive, they're more likely to give. So I've probably sent out as many cards as I've received. It's like anything, you've got to give to receive!

Charlotte: And who do you give them to? I mean, is it the same people who you get them from, or different people?

Laura: No, no, it's not like that. I give them to who deserves it. It doesn't matter if they've given me one, in fact I don't think I've ever, like, exchanged e-cards with anyone, that would be a bit odd. No, just people who I have helped me, you know, and I want to say thank you to.

The operation of the moral norm of reciprocity can be seen in the way Laura describes giving recognition when 'someone has done something special for [her], or has gone the extra mile for the team' as 'the right thing to do'. Laura's use of the phrase 'the right thing to do' suggests that she feels a sense of moral responsibility to provide recognition to others which extends beyond her personal reasons for expressing thanks to that individual. The existence of a formalised scheme which encourages employees to recognise and express thanks to colleagues for doing 'something special or 'over and above their normal job' serves to further reinforce the belief that recognising colleagues for making a positive difference to the working lives of others is the 'right' and, indeed, organisationally-sanctioned thing to do.

However, central to Laura's account of her reasons for sending e-thank you cards to her colleagues is her own desire to be recognised, suggesting that giving recognition when 'someone has done something special…or has gone the extra mile for the team' is not only morally 'the right thing to do' but also driven by the expectation that she will, in turn, receive recognition from others. Thus, in sending e-thank you cards to her colleagues, Laura considers herself to be helping to build 'a culture of recognition' from which she will also benefit since 'as more and more people receive, they're more likely to give'. She suggests that this strategy is working ('I've probably sent out as many cards as I've received'), leading her to conclude that 'you've got to give to receive'. Therefore, Laura's decision to give her colleagues recognition is both driven

by a sense of moral responsibility to recognise someone when they have helped you and her desire to receive recognition herself.

The kind of social exchange behaviour described by Laura is different to the kind of mutual reciprocal interaction between two people which featured in Marie's earlier account, where it is assumed that an individual's reciprocity obligations should be met by providing a return benefit directly to the individual who provided the benefit. Rather, the type of social exchange facilitated through Laura's 'culture of recognition' shares more similarities with the generalised or univocal reciprocity described by Lévi-Strauss (1957) where exchange transactions can be indirect and not necessarily mutual. In essence, univocal or generalised reciprocation is a social system in which an individual A helps an individual B, but does not expect a reciprocal return from B but rather from another individual C or D (Ekeh 1974). Thus, Blau's view of individuals as self-interested and egocentric agents motivated to engage in social interaction by the rewards it typically brings is replaced by an understanding of individuals as members of a community sharing a commitment to the common good. As Putnam describes it, generalised reciprocity involves 'not 'I'll do this for you, because you are more powerful than I,' nor even 'I'll do this for you now, if you do that for me now,' but 'I'll do this for you now, knowing that somewhere down the road you'll do something for me'' (1993: 182-183).

According to Baker and Dutton (2007), generalised reciprocity is a form of positive social capital in organisations which can expand the capacities of both individuals and groups. First systematically described by Bourdieu (1986), the term "social capital" refers to 'the actual or potential resources which are embedded within, available through and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit' (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998: 243). Employee recognition schemes can be used to motivate individuals to engage in generalised reciprocity 'by affecting people's perceptions of each other, attracting them to each other and instilling expectations of mutual regard' (Baker and Dutton 2007: 330). This, in turn, may result in increased levels of trust and therefore willingness to ask for help, and an increased willingness to exchange further resources safe in the knowledge that help given to others will be repaid in the future. The social capital created is considered positive if the means by which it is created expands the abilities of individuals and groups to achieve their personal and professional goals (Baker and Dutton 2007).

For example, if the giving and receiving of e-thank you cards within a work team cultivates a sense of mutual respect and elevates trust between co-workers, and if the team uses this this shared respect for and trust in each other to share knowledge and ideas and work more collaboratively, then the interaction has created positive social capital which has been used to achieve a positive outcome (Baker and Dutton 2007). This suggests that employee recognition schemes which encourage the exchange of recognition and other benefits with other members of the work unit or whole organisation may fulfil an important function in creating the conditions for the creation of positive social capital in organisations.

This finding contributes to a growing body of research in organisational studies where researchers have applied the concept of social capital in the explanation of how interpersonal relationships may deliver benefits both for the individuals and organisations which invest in them (see Adler and Kwon 2002 for a review). This research has generally conceived of social capital as a network of interpersonal relationships which ultimately benefit the individual through facilitating access to sources of information, providing a means of accruing influence and power over others, and providing a sense of solidarity based on shared social norms and beliefs (Adler and Kwon 2002; Burt 1997; Coleman 1988; Sandefur and Laumann 1998).

The benefits of social capital for the members of the social network may also translate into positive benefits for the organisation of which they are a part (Adler and Kwon 2002). Social networks provide members with access to information which is relevant, timely and trustworthy (Sandefur and Laumann 1998), enabling superior performance which has beneficial consequences for the organisation as a whole. In some circumstances, power benefits may also have a positive impact on the organisation as a whole. Since some individuals will accrue greater amounts of power and influence over others, they can adopt a leadership role, allowing them to achieve their personal and professional goals more effectively (Adler and Kwon 2002). Furthermore, Adler and Kwon argue that, as members' feelings of solidarity and cooperation with other members of their social network 'spill over into [their] involvements with other associations', they are less likely to be involved in petty conflicts and therefore be more engaged with the organisation's goals (2002: 30).

Given the potential benefits of social capital for both individuals and organisations, the suggestion that employee recognition could foster its creation through motivating individuals to engage in generalised reciprocity represents an exciting theoretical development in this study and a clear opportunity for future research. However, before employee recognition schemes are advocated to organisations as an enabler of social capital (Baker and Dutton 2007), there are some practical questions and implications which should be considered.

Firstly, social capital is not the property of any one individual or entity, it inheres within interactions between individuals (Waldstrøm 2003). As a consequence, if a relationship breaks down or one of the parties leaves the organisation, thus terminating the relationship, the social capital embedded within that relationship is likely to be lost. Indeed, social capital is as fragile as it is intangible, requiring a constant investment of time and/or resources in order to maintain or develop it (Waldstrøm 2003). As Lesser (2000) notes, whilst collaborative practices implemented by organisations such as videoconferences and online chat rooms and, indeed, employee recognition schemes create opportunities for employees to make social connections, to build social capital, organisations need to do more than simply encourage social interactions among employees (cited in Adler and Kwon 2002). This indicates that if, as Baker and Dutton say, employee recognition is an enabler of social capital, it should be understood as one component in a broader bundle of organisational practices needed by the organisation to foster social capital by providing employees with the motivation and opportunities to create and maintain social connections, and a complement to strategies designed to retain these employees in order to prevent the loss of social capital from the organisation.

Secondly, although the literature on social capital generally emphasises its benefits for individuals and groups, some researchers are concerned social capital can have other, less desirable social consequences (Adler and Kwon 2002; Waldstrøm 2003). One such concern is that, in a workplace context, there is the possibility for an individual who spends a lot of time and resources creating and nurturing connections with other individuals to experience hostility from co-workers who perceive their extensive networking as suspicious (Waldstrøm 2003). Since social capital is generally created through social activities engaged in by individuals for other reasons (Coleman 1988; Waldstrøm 2003), conscious and overt attempts by individuals to cultivate social

networks which they can exploit for their own benefit may be perceived negatively by co-workers.

Indeed, the importance of a perceived lack of instrumental motive for the giving of recognition was also evident in the interviewees' accounts of their recognition experiences. Although, as discussed above, interviewees discussed the giving and receiving of recognition as generating benefits, not just for the recipient but also for the donor and other parties, they were critical of individuals who they perceived to be consciously using recognition as a means of achieving their own ends. This was most clearly seen in the accounts of interviewees such as **Mick** who had experienced recognition being used as a form of incentive by managers.

Charlotte: So what do you think about the recognition scheme generally?

Mick: Well, I think it's good so long as it's used in the right way!

Charlotte: Okay. What do you mean the right way?

Mick: Well, it's not always. For instance, there was a manager here a while ago who only used to offer them out when they wanted something, you know like "come along to this marketing event and help us out, you know, showing customers to their seats or something and we'll give you £50 Sparkle vouchers". For me, that's just wrong, it's not an incentive scheme, it's about saying thank you to another human being for something they did which meant something to you…

Here, the manager offers individuals in their team a recognition award (and the associated financial value) to provide them with added motivation to do things which they might not otherwise have been inclined to do, such as attending a marketing event outside of the normal working day. In doing so, the manager appropriates the recognition award as an incentive, 'a material tangible reward that is earned through achieving specific defined aims or objectives that are known in advance' (Rose 2011: 1). Thus, now the employee attends the marketing event *in order to* obtain the financial value of the recognition. This financial value can then be used to purchase a gift from the online catalogue which includes vouchers for high-street stores or supermarkets.

Mick's description of this practice as 'just wrong' indicates his understanding of recognition as fulfilling a fundamentally different purpose to an incentive, supporting the distinction made between recognition and incentives in the practitioner literature (Hansen et al. 2002; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999; Rose 2001; 2011; Silverman 2004). For Mick, the 'right' use of recognition is to '[say] thank you to another human being' for something they have already done and which 'meant something' to the recognition donor, not as something to be explicitly offered up in advance as a reward. As described by Blau (1964), social exchange generates unspecified obligations; when one individual provides benefits to another, there is an expectation of some future return, although individuals are left to independently decide how and how soon they should discharge their obligations (Gouldner 1960). As Blau notes, social bonds are strengthened 'by remaining obligated to others as well as by trusting them to discharge their obligations for considerable periods' (1964: 99). Thus, to specify the terms of the exchange in advance and demand an immediate reciprocation for the recognition suggests a lack of trust in the employee and signals the line manager's intentions to engage in a business-like, rather than social, relationship with the employee.

Indeed, Mick's negative reaction to the use of recognition awards as incentives may be explained by the way that such a practice treats recognition as if it were an alienated commodity with which to be bartered. This affronts his understanding of recognition as a form of gift which bears the identity of the giver and of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. A distinction popularised by Mauss (1925/2011), in commodity exchange, a relationship is created between the objects exchanged whereas, in gift exchange, a relationship is created between the parties involved (Gregory 1982). Unlike commodity exchange where the obligations which temporarily link the parties are dissolved once the transaction is completed, in gift exchange, '[f]ulfilling the obligation to give does not discharge it; it recreates it by reaffirming the relationship of which the obligation is a part' (Carrier 1991: 124). Thus, to treat recognition as a commodity relocates the act of giving recognition from the social to the economic sphere and undermines its role in the creation and maintenance of social relationships between individuals.

The interviewees also discussed further experiences of the 'misuse' of the recognition scheme where, again, managers had appropriated the associated financial value of the recognition awards for their own purposes. In the extract below, **Callum** describes

how he has experienced recognition awards being used to financially compensate individuals after an unfavourable pay review.

> *Callum: Well there was a piece of work that was about removing the final salary pension scheme. So you can imagine, that work did not go down too well with this group of people who'd been here for... 25, 30 years and so they're all fully loaded up with final salaries, all that type of stuff. So it didn't go down well…So unsurprisingly, just after we did all that…and that all was communicated back, the month after, we saw a spike in Sparkle awards. So there was a load of dodgy dealing going on, with people saying "look I know you've lost a bit of money here, but I'll just give you a £250 Sparkle award, and that will make up for that". It doesn't always happen that way though, of course. But some managers do misuse them, definitely. And I think the problem is when you see that happening with other people, it makes you a bit suspicious when you get one. You know, you think, "what's the catch?"*

Callum suggests that the practice of some managers of using recognition awards to financially compensate individuals for a loss of money in another area of their reward package may potentially lead to the awards becoming associated with something negative which has or is about to happen. Recognition recipients who have witnessed line managers using the recognition awards in this way in the past may feel suspicious of the line manager's motives for giving them the recognition. Indeed, as Blau (1964) notes, an important social reward sought by individuals in their interactions with others is social approval, however, for social approval to have significance, it must be believed to be genuine. This suggests that individuals should avoid bartering with positive evaluations of an individual 'lest they cease to be accepted as genuine and thus lose their significance' (Blau 1964: 100).

5.3.2.1 Theme two summary/discussion

This discussion of the second theme, 'you've got to give to receive' has suggested that the giving and receiving of recognition is largely governed by a social exchange framework, where reciprocity may be direct (between two individuals) and/or generalised to the wider social group. The words 'you've got to give to receive' which define this theme were expressed by Laura in her account of her reasons for giving e-

thank you cards to her colleagues, revealing that her decision to give recognition was driven at least in part by self-interest concerns and the expectation of some future return. This finding was consistent with Blau's social exchange theory that individuals are motivated to engage in social interactions by 'the returns they are expected to bring and typically do bring from others' (1964: 91). Indeed, interviewees described the perceived benefits of gift giving for the donor, such as the recipient's gratitude and the establishment and maintenance of a social relationship which may be beneficial to the donor in the future either through access to support or additional resources.

The interviewees' accounts further suggested that the giving of recognition is driven by individuals' concern with maintaining balance in their social relationships with others (Blau 1964). Individuals' shared norm of reciprocity which entails that 'You *should* give benefits to those who give you benefits' (Gouldner 1960: 170; original emphasis) provides a convincing explanation for the giving of recognition; the norm serves to both compel individuals to reciprocate benefits they have received, and instils confidence that benefits they give will be returned in the future.

Although some interviewee accounts revealed an expectation that reciprocity obligations should be met by providing by providing a return benefit directly to the individual who provided the benefit, others, such as Laura, demonstrated an understanding of reciprocity as generalised to the wider social group. The role of employee recognition schemes in motivating individuals to engage in generalised reciprocity 'by affecting people's perceptions of each other, attracting them to each other and instilling expectations of mutual regard' is suggested by Baker and Dutton (2007: 330). If these interactions between employees, facilitated by the giving and receiving of recognition, result in increased levels of trust and therefore willingness to ask for help, and an increased willingness to exchange further resources safe in the knowledge that help given to others will be repaid in the future, then the interactions have created positive social capital which can potentially expand the capacities of individuals and the organisations of which they are part (Baker and Dutton 2007). Thus, by helping to establish connections between colleagues, and creating a network of interdependent social relationships which can provide access to information, resources, support and influence, employee recognition schemes may provide the conditions for the creation of social capital. Such social capital benefits not just the individual members of the network but the organisation which employs these

individuals, through their enhanced capabilities to search for and access resources and information which can be used to achieve organisational objectives.

However, researchers on social capital have warned that there is the danger that an individual who consciously attempts to create and nurture connections with other individuals which they can exploit for their own benefit may be perceived negatively by co-workers who perceive their extensive networking as suspicious (Waldstrøm 2003). The reason for this seems to be the tacit belief that social capital is generally created through social activities engaged in by individuals for other reasons, rather than pursued as an end in itself (Coleman 1988; Waldstrøm 2003). Therefore, although social capital may provide a means of individuals accruing influence and power over others (Adler and Kwon 2002; Burt 1997; Coleman 1988; Sandefur and Laumann 1998), individuals should be careful to avoid the impression that they are consciously calculating the personal benefits that the connection will bring.

In a similar way, whilst the giving of recognition may generate benefits for the donor, the interviewees' accounts indicate that it is important that the giving of recognition is not perceived by the recipient to be a deliberate attempt to influence their behaviour. As discussed above, overt attempts by line managers to use recognition as a means to achieve their own personal and professional goals or to compensate employees for financial losses in other areas of the reward package are viewed negatively by interviewees since these managerial practices affront employees' understanding of recognition as taking place as part of social rather than economic relations.

The use of recognition awards by line managers in an incentive arrangement (e.g. "come along to this marketing event…and we'll give you £50 Sparkle vouchers") may have potentially serious consequences for the quality of the relationship between the line manager and employee since it suggests a lack of trust in the employee and signals the line manager's unwillingness to enter into a social, rather than purely economic, relationship with the employee. As discussed in relation to theme one, the quality of the relationship between the line manager and employees is of central importance since it contributes to employees' perceived organisational support and consequently influences employees' levels of organisational commitment and attitudes towards the organisation (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). The recipient's perception that they have been given a recognition award by their line manager in an attempt to manipulate them

in some way rather than in genuine acknowledgement of their contribution may negatively affect organisational commitment through influencing the employee's perceptions of the degree to which their line manager values their contributions and cares about their well-being (perceived supervisor support) (Kottke and Sharafinski 1988). Indeed, research has shown that perceptions of unfairness or dishonesty can motivate employees to "get even" by reducing effort and productivity (Akerlof 1982; Ederer and Fehr 2007) and engaging in other dysfunctional behaviours (see Skarlicki and Folger 1997).

Certainly, the interviewees' accounts of the 'misuse' of recognition awards suggests that there is a need for further education of line managers on the circumstances in which it is appropriate to give recognition awards in order to avoid affronting employees' shared assumption that recognition is 'about saying thank you'. However, it also raises important questions about the reasons why line managers are resorting to 'dodgy dealing' to 'make up' for the unfavourable financial outcomes of this process for employees, as well as highlighting how the wider context of existing HR practices and policies to which HR practices are applied can influence how they are implemented and managed by line managers.

5.4   Chapter conclusion

This chapter started by contextualising the recognition experiences discussed in this chapter by providing further information, gained through interviews with employees who were involved in its design, about the employee recognition scheme being operated in the organisation. Next, the findings of the thematic analysis of the transcripts of the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences were presented. The first theme I identified is 'recognition is personal' which highlights the ways in which the meaning of recognition is constructed within a particular interpersonal context by different individuals occupying different roles and at different points in the recognition process. The second theme is 'you've got to give to receive' which is defined by the interviewees' shared understanding of recognition as being governed by a social exchange framework in which the giving and receiving of recognition facilitates the creation and maintenance of relationships which can benefit both the individuals and the organisations which invest in them. These two themes are considered to represent key perceptions and beliefs held by employees which

contribute to their understandings of their experiences of recognition in the workplace. These empirical insights were supported with extracts from the interview transcripts and were discussed in relation to both the existing literature on employee recognition and the literature on gift giving. I concluded each theme by summarising the main insights generated through the discussion of the theme and outlining the practical implications of the findings.

The purpose of this final section is to reflect upon how the findings discussed in the preceding chapter address each of the three research questions identified at the start of this thesis. Further implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed in Chapter Seven.

5.4.1   How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?

Through my thematic analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with employees at Insurer about their recognition experiences, I have been able to draw out some of the tacit perceptions and beliefs which employees hold about recognition, thus contributing to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees.

Firstly, at Insurer, the scheme design is an important factor in determining the ways in which individuals understand their recognition experiences as being made up of multiple distinct but connected elements, each with different meanings for and value to the recipient. These structural components are: the actual act of nomination by the donor, which has both informational and emotional value to the recipient; the communication of the award by the line manager, which conveys information about the line manager's perception of them, their intentions for their relationship and how well the line manager understands them as an individual and their recognition preferences; and the recognition gift itself which recipients value being able to choose for themselves. Thus, the lived experience of recognition is inherently complex, made up of the different meanings which individuals give to each element of the recognition experience. This suggests that, just as there is the potential for each component of the recognition experience to add value for the recipient, there is also the risk that one component, such as the way the recognition is delivered by the line manager, could negatively affect the individual's entire recognition experience.

Indeed, in addition to the scheme design itself, the findings discussed in this chapter suggest that employees' experiences of recognition are mediated by the ways in which the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation. The informal recognition approaches of individuals, particularly line managers, were found to strongly influence recipients' experiences of the recognition facilitated by the organisation's formal recognition scheme. There is clear potential for line managers' personal beliefs about and attitudes towards recognition, for example, about how recognition should be delivered, to work in harmony with and even enhance the formal scheme. However, there is also a danger that individuals' recognition experiences will be negatively affected in circumstances where such personal beliefs about how recognition should be delivered, or the ways in which it should be used by line managers, are at odds with those of other parties involved in the recognition process, or the organisation's intentions for the scheme. Furthermore, it is likely that the ways in which line managers use or 'misuse' the recognition scheme may themselves be influenced by the wider organisational context in which they are operating, including the consequences of pre-existing HR practices and policies.

Overall, the findings discussed in this chapter contribute to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees by illustrating how a range of factors including the scheme design, the way in which the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation and the interpersonal and organisational context to which it is applied mediate individuals' experiences of recognition. In doing so, this study supports the work of Feys et al. (2013) who argue that managers and organisations should implement recognition schemes as motivational strategies only under certain well-defined conditions by providing further empirical examples of both the positive and negative consequences of employee recognition schemes.

5.4.2 What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?

Applied in my interpretation of the interviewees' accounts of their recognition experiences, theories of gift giving, as ways of understanding the giving and receiving of recognition, have expanded knowledge of the social functions and implications of employee recognition.

Firstly, the application of signalling theories of gift giving (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001) to the interviewees' accounts suggests that the giving and receiving of employee recognition has a communicative function to convey information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition, including how the nominating individual's perceives the recipient and their willingness to invest time and effort in their relationship. Furthermore, through delivering/presenting the recognition in a way which is meaningful to the recipient, the line manager can signal how well they identify with the recipient as an individual and can accurately predict their recognition preferences. This information may have social utility functions by helping to develop and sustain significant relationships between individuals based on mutual identification and empathy and conversely in "screening out" relationships where there is limited potential for mutual identification and empathy between the two parties (Camerer 1988; Fennell 2002).

Secondly, insights from social exchange theory (Blau 1964) have been used to draw out the role of recognition in the development and maintenance of social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace. The findings suggest that the giving and receiving of recognition is governed by a social exchange framework, whereby reciprocity may be direct (between two individuals) or generalised to the wider social unit or work group, and may take the form of further recognition or alternatively access to additional support or resources. The operation of a shared norm of reciprocity serves both to compel individuals to reciprocate benefits they have received and instil confidence that benefits they give will be returned in the future, providing a plausible rationale for individuals' participation in the employee recognition scheme.

Further potential positive social implications of employee recognition may be illuminated through the concept of social capital (Bourdieu 1986). By helping to establish connections between colleagues, and creating a network of interdependent social relationships which can be used to access information, resources, support and influence, employee recognition schemes may facilitate the creation of social capital which ultimately benefits the individuals and the organisations of which they are part (Baker and Dutton 2007).

5.4.3 What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

As discussed in Chapter Two, existing research on employee recognition has tended to invoke a combination of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory to provide a theoretical rationale for the use of recognition as a management technique. Such research has primarily focused on analysing the impact of recognition on individual behaviour. However, the application of theories of gift giving in my interpretation of the interviewees' accounts of their recognition experiences has revealed how the giving and receiving of recognition in the workplace may also have important and previously un-researched social functions and implications.

The first of these social functions of employee recognition, to help in developing and maintaining social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace, is suggested by social exchange theory (Blau 1964). The giving and receiving of recognition can generate benefits not just for the recipient but also the donor and other parties through a moral norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) which both compels individuals to reciprocate for the recognition they receive and to recognise others when they have benefited them in some way. Social exchange between individuals, facilitated by the giving and receiving of recognition, builds trust between individuals which, in turn, encourages the ongoing exchange of resources and support.

Furthermore, the concept of social exchange (Blau 1964) provides a plausible explanation for the negative reactions of employees to the managerial use of recognition to incentivise employees to perform certain duties or engage in particular ways. Such practices affront employees' understanding of recognition as a form of gift which creates a relationship between the individuals involved in its exchange; to treat recognition as a commodity which can be bartered away relocates the act of giving recognition from the social to the economic sphere and undermines its role in the creation and maintenance of social relationships between individuals.

Insights from signalling models of gift giving (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001) have illuminated the second of these social functions of employee recognition to convey meaning about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition, including how the nominating individual's perceives the recipient and their willingness to invest in their relationship. Furthermore, line managers can signal how well they identify with individuals in their teams as

individuals and can accurately predict their recognition preferences through their choice of how to deliver/present recognition.

Indeed, in addition to drawing attention to the communicative function of employee recognition, when combined with the concept of empathetic dialogue (Fennell 2002), signalling theories enhance our knowledge of employee recognition by providing insights into how successful acts of recognition operate and, conversely, the reasons why sometimes acts of recognition fail. For Fennell (2002), the success of a gift can be measured by the level of empathetic dialogue between the two parties. This 'specialized form of communication' involves both the donor and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other, the donor seeking to predict the type of gift which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the amount of effort and thought the donor put into the selection of the gift (2002: 86). This empathetic dialogue plays an important part in developing and nurturing significant relationships between individuals based on empathy. Thus, according to Fennell, gifts are unsuccessful (or fail) if the donor is unable or unwilling to exercise empathetic imagination and/or the recipient fails to empathetically identify with the donor's imaginative efforts in selecting the gift, and may ultimately cause the recipient to question their compatibility with the donor.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the scheme design at Insurer limits the potential for empathetic dialogue to the interaction between an individual and their line manager who is responsible for delivering the recognition to the recognition recipient. A line manager may communicate to the recipient how well they know the recipient as an individual and can empathise with their recognition preferences (the type of gift they would like to receive) by their choice of how to deliver or present the recognition to the recipient. If the recipient then recognises the thought and effort which the line manager put into delivering the recognition in a way that is meaningful to the recipient, the act of recognition may be considered successful. A good example of successful recognition which develops and nurtures the relationship between the two parties is described by William in his account in Section 5.3.1.

On the other hand, an example of an unsuccessful act of recognition is provided by Bob (again in Section 5.3.1 of this chapter) where the line manager's failure to identify with Bob as an individual and empathise with his recognition preferences left Bob

feeling 'cold'. Here, the absence of empathetic dialogue between Bob and his line manager resulted in a failed act of recognition. The important role played by empathetic dialogue in developing and nurturing significant relationships based on empathy suggests that this failed act of recognition may have negative consequences for the quality of the relationship between Bob and his line manager, potentially causing Bob to consider terminating the relationship altogether.

Thus, although illuminating in itself, when viewed as a complement to the signalling models, Fennell's concept of empathetic dialogue helps us to understand the role of recognition in providing individuals with the information upon which to base their decisions about whether to pursue or abandon relationships with others. There are therefore important practical implications of this finding in terms of recruiting the right individuals into these critical line management roles and providing them with the correct training and support to enable them to provide effective recognition.

Using a comparable structure to this chapter, the next chapter, Chapter Six, presents my interpretations of the accounts of employees at Council X with the aim of further expanding knowledge of the social functions and implications of employee recognition though consideration of how it operates in a different social and organisational context.

Chapter Six:

Interpretations of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences at Council X

6.1   Introduction

The purpose of this chapter, as with the previous chapter, is to identify some of the tacit perceptions and beliefs which employees hold about recognition, contributing to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees. Through applying theories of gift giving and other relevant literature in the interpretation of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences, the chapter aims to expand knowledge of the social functions and implications of employee recognition.

Following the previous chapter which presented the findings of the interviews with employees at Insurer, this chapter presents my interpretations of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences at Council X. As explored in the chapter which follows, a key finding of the research conducted at Council X was that employees' recognition experiences are strongly mediated by the wider organisational context in which the Council's recognition scheme operates. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a very short overview of the public sector setting for this research. The chapter then follows a comparable structure to that of the previous chapter, starting with a summary of the Council's customer service awards scheme, The Excellence Awards, including the nomination process and the awards ceremony. Next, I present the findings of the thematic analysis of the transcripts of the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences.

Two main themes were identified in the transcripts of Council X employees' accounts of their recognition experiences: 'there is a culture of suspicion' and 'we're all one organisation'. These themes are considered to represent key perceptions and beliefs held by employees which contribute to their understandings of their experiences of recognition in the workplace. Extracts from the interview transcripts are used to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme (Braun and Clarke 2006). As with the themes discussed in Chapter Six, the names of the themes are themselves direct quotations from interviewees, selected for their ability to exemplify the identified themes (Bluff 1997; Secker et al. 1995). Where relevant, these empirical insights are discussed in

relation to theories of gift giving and other existing theoretical and empirical literature. Each theme concludes with a summary of the main insights generated through the preceding discussion and the practical implications of the findings. The chapter closes with a brief chapter conclusion relating the findings to the research questions guiding this thesis.

6.2 The public sector setting

The UK public sector has undergone extensive and substantial organisational change in the past decade as a result of the recent (2007-2008) global economic crisis and the consequent austerity measures introduced by the incoming Conservative-led coalition government (Conway, Kiefer, Hartley and Briner 2014). Such austerity measures are a response to the increase in government borrowing between 2008 and 2010 and the structural deficit created by the financial crisis, subsequent recession and the reduction in tax revenues from the housing and financial sectors (Bach 2012). The Government intends to eliminate the structural deficit by 2015, with almost three quarters of deficit reduction being achieved through reductions in public spending (Bach 2012).

The impact of public spending cuts have been felt throughout the labour market, but the most immediately affected has been the public sector workforce, with local authorities being required to reduce spending by 27 per cent in real terms between 2010-11 and 2014-15 (Bach 2012; Taylor-Gooby 2011). As a result of the Government's austerity programme, local government has been forced to implement massive organisational changes including redundancies, pay freezes, changes to strategy, cutbacks in services provided and department mergers and restructures (Conway et al. 2014). Indeed, around 400,000 public sector jobs are expected to be lost by 2015-16 (PwC 2011) and the Local Government Association (LGA) 2014) predicts that the amount of funding available to provide local services such as running public parks, libraries and youth centres is likely to shrink by 66 per cent by the end of the decade. At the time this research was conducted, pay had been frozen for five years at Council X.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this research takes place against a backdrop of significant organisational change and within an environment characterised by a general sense of uncertainty and fear about what the future holds for the public sector and its workforce, and that this context inevitably affects

employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour (Johns 2006). This specific research context provides a valuable opportunity to examine the ways in which contextual factors may mediate employees' perceptions of recognition provided to them by the organisation and the employment relationship more broadly.

6.3   The customer service awards scheme

As noted in Chapter Four, in order to prevent identification of Council X by the name of its customer service awards scheme, I have given the scheme the pseudonym "The Excellence Awards". To reduce the use of square brackets in quotations which can potentially distract from the meaning of the original text, in any interview extracts presented below where the interviewee refers to the scheme by name, I have simply substituted this name for "The Excellence Awards". Any other modifications I have made to the original text are indicated in the usual way through the use of ellipsis and square brackets.

Launched in 2011, The Excellence Awards were designed to highlight and recognise individuals and teams within the Council who have provided exceptional customer service. Nominations open in September and close at the end of November, with an awards ceremony being held at the beginning of December each year. Both internal (Council employees) and external customers (members of the public) can nominate an individual or a team for an award by completing a nomination form and explaining what the individual or team did which impressed or made a difference to them. The form can be completed online via the Council's website or paper copies can be collected from various reception points and libraries around the City and returned using the freepost address. Nominators are asked to supply their name and email address so that the Council can confirm receipt of their nomination and inform them if their nomination leads to the individual or team receiving an award.

The nominated individual or the head of the nominated team/service is notified that they have been nominated by email. The nominations are judged by a panel of individuals drawn from across the organisation who select a winner and between two and three other shortlisted finalists in each category. The winners of the Council's Employee of the Month scheme are also included for consideration for a further award. All nominees are notified of the outcome of the judging process by email.

The finalists are invited to attend the awards ceremony and permitted to bring one guest. Prior to the awards ceremony, a video recording is made of each of the finalists talking about the job they do or service in which they work and what it means to them to be nominated to be played at the awards ceremony. Figure 6.1 provides a visual description of this nomination process.
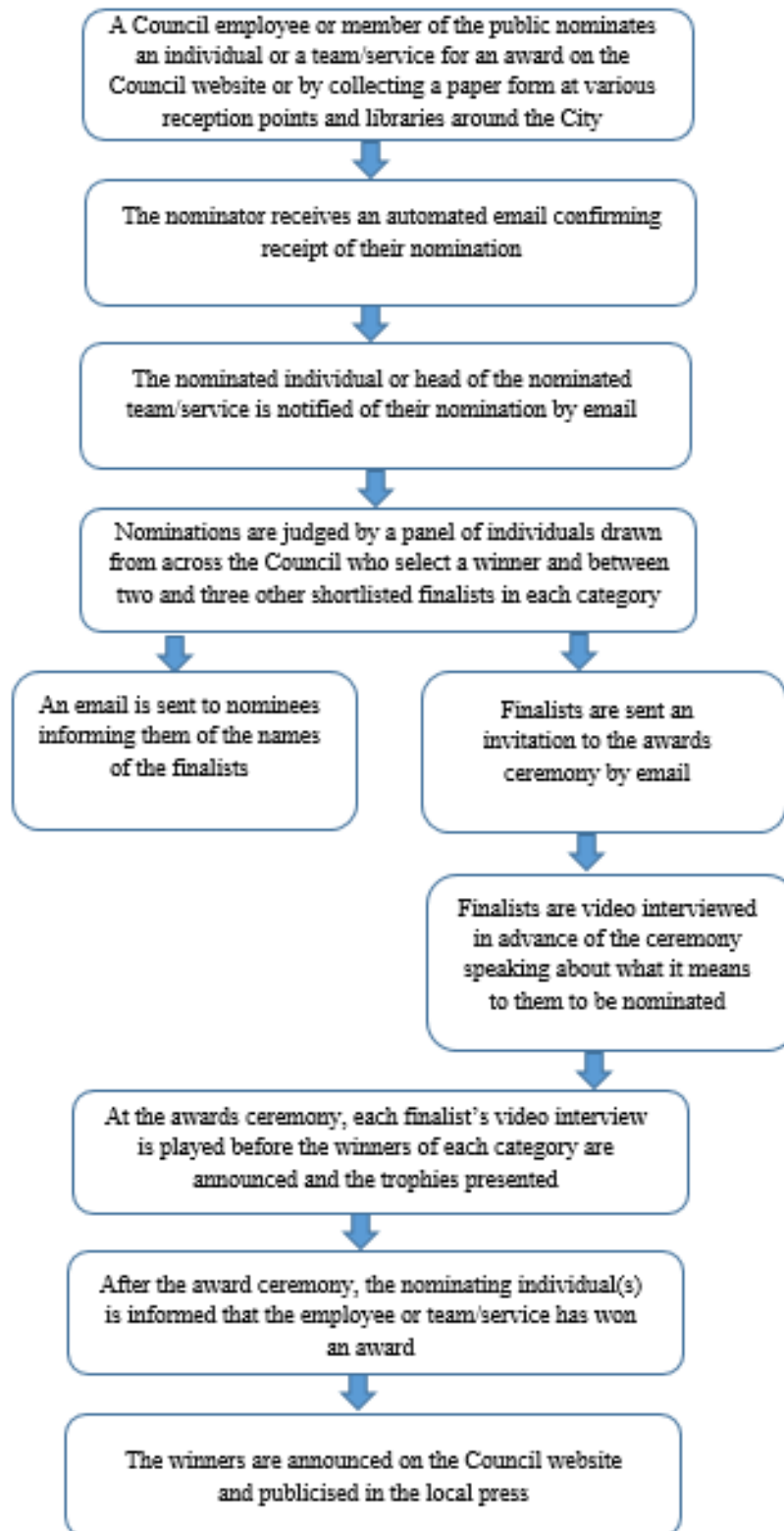
Figure 6.1 The Excellence Awards nomination process

6.3.2   The 2012 Excellence Awards ceremony

The 2012 Excellence Awards ceremony was held on a week-day evening in early December at a local hotel and attended by around 200 guests, made up of finalists and their colleagues, family and some members of the public (including myself), as well as the Chief Executive and other senior Councillors and the Rt. Hon. Lord Mayor of the City. Guests were greeted with a champagne reception and carols from the Council staff choir. A seating chart indicated where guests should be seated when entering the large function room for the second part of the evening to hear the award winners announced. Bottles of white and red wine were provided on the tables.

The Chief Executive of the Council opened with a short speech where she emphasised the role that The Excellence Awards play in building team spirit and confidence at a time when pressures are mounting in the public sector. The finalists for each category were then introduced in turn, using short clips from their video recorded interviews, before the winner was finally announced. Overall, prizes were awarded to three teams and five individuals across eight categories. Award winners received a certificate, a trophy engraved with their name to be displayed in their department office and high-street vouchers to the value of £25 (this amount was scaled up for team awards).

Mid-way through the award presentations, there was a short break where a hot and cold buffet and entertainment from an a cappella vocal group made up of Council workers was provided. The evening closed with a disco. The award winners were subsequently announced on the Council website and publicised in the local press and the Council internal magazine.

The Excellence Awards are fully funded through sponsorship and support from suppliers, partner organisations and proceeds from the Council's staff lottery.

6.4   Findings of thematic analysis

As described in greater detail in Chapter Four, a thematic approach was taken to the analysis of the interview data collected at Council X. This analytic process involved coding the transcripts for different ideas of interest by making hard copies of the interview transcripts, writing notes in the wide margin and using different coloured highlighters to mark text which represented different ideas of interest. Then, I sorted these codes into broader, overarching themes using visual representations called

thematic maps (Braun and Clarke 2006). Figure 6.2 is a thematic map which presents the final stage of a lengthy process of reviewing and refining the themes so that data within the themes cohered together meaningfully and there are clear and identifiable distinctions between the themes (Patton 1990, cited in Braun and Clarke 2006).

The thematic map below indicates the two main themes and related sub-themes which I have identified in the transcripts of the interviews with employees at Council X about their recognition experiences. As in the preceding chapter, the themes have been named using quotations from interviewees and represent perceptions and beliefs held by employees which contribute to their understandings of experiences of recognition in the workplace. The interviewees' accounts revealed that the employees understood their awards and The Excellence Awards more broadly in complex and, at times, contradictory ways, but always with reference to the specific organisational context in which they operated. Indeed, I felt that many interviewees saw their interview as an opportunity to "off-load" about their experiences of working at Council X during such a period of organisational change and uncertainty. Although the Constructionist approach taken to the interviews in this study required me to allow the interviewee's perspective to unfold in a way that was meaningful to them, this did mean that it was sometimes difficult to disentangle the interviewee's attitudes and beliefs about recognition from their attitudes towards the Council and public sector more generally. I have tried to preserve this sense of the ways in which the organisational context has shaped the employees' perceptions and beliefs about recognition and their relationship with the Council more broadly in my interpretation of the interviewees' accounts in this chapter.

Indeed, the first theme I have identified in the transcripts of the interviews with employees about their recognition experiences, 'there is a culture of suspicion', is defined by the interviewees' own awareness of how their experiences of working in the public sector influence the ways in which they experience and understand recognition, and their beliefs about how recognition should communicate what the donor values about the recipient as an individual and the scheme should be managed transparently and with greater involvement from the service users.

The second theme, 'we're all one organisation', draws together several different beliefs held by interviewees about the ways in which The Excellence Awards, the

awards ceremony in particular, can promote a sense of unity and solidarity with other individuals and teams across the Council by boosting awareness of the work performed in different areas, whilst at the same time posing a threat to such solidarity by selecting certain individuals and teams for recognition over others. These seemingly contradictory perceptions and attitudes held by employees towards The Excellence Awards ceremony and the scheme more broadly are considered further illustration of the influence of the organisational context on how individuals experience and understand employee recognition.
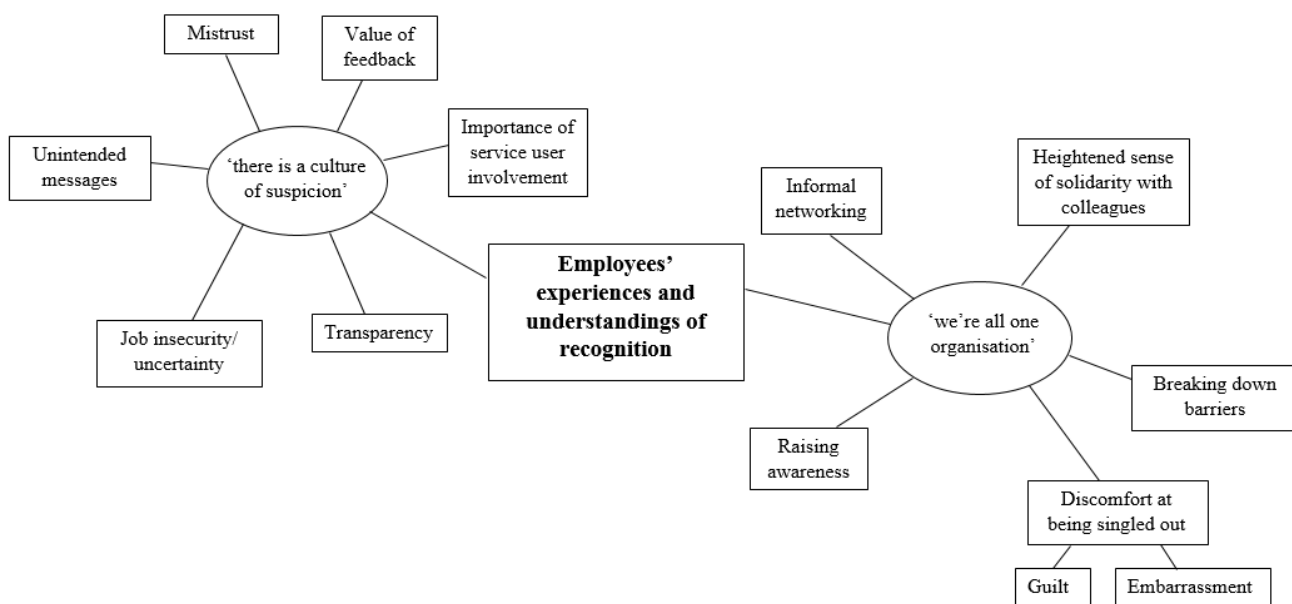
Figure 6.2. Thematic map showing two main themes identified in transcripts of interviews with employees at Council X

6.4.1   Theme one: 'there is a culture of suspicion'

This theme is defined by the interviewees' own awareness of how their experiences of working in the public sector influence the ways in which they experience and understand recognition and their beliefs about the ways in which recognition should be provided. In his account below, **James** describes how the 'culture' of the public sector affects the way he and his colleagues perceive schemes such as The Excellence Awards.

James: People who work in the public sector are naturally very cynical about these kind of schemes anyway. I think it's just that is the culture of these places that you think "What is the ulterior motive? This is obviously a political thing." Strangely enough, there is almost a feeling amongst other people that the awards were a little bit of a parting gift, like a well done and goodbye kind of thing, so I think that for some people it made them a little bit more nervous than anything else. Of course, I'm sure for a lot of people it did boost morale. It was a nice gesture for [the Council] to show that they recognise what employees are bringing to the table especially under these sort of challenges, lots of restructures, lots of funding cuts etc. But there is a culture of suspicion in all things, I think particularly in tough times, so I think we have to be mindful of that, realistically speaking.

Here, James emphasises the importance of 'a culture of suspicion' in understanding employee reactions to schemes such as The Excellence Awards. Organisational culture is defined as a 'pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems' (Schein 1992:12). James' account suggests that employees' 'suspicion' and 'cynical' attitudes towards The Excellence Awards are manifestations of shared cultural beliefs about the appropriate way to respond to new initiatives within the public sector. Indeed, recent research has found that a lack of permanency and constant switching of initiatives as a result of repeated shifts in political leadership can result in cynical attitudes towards new initiatives which employees view as the latest in a never-ending cycle of new and improved versions to suit the political agenda of the moment (Greasley, Watson and Patel 2009).

Although James acknowledges that it was 'nice' for the Council to 'show that they recognise what employees are bringing to the table', he states that, 'particularly in tough times', employees are likely to suspect that the Council has a 'ulterior motive' for giving recognition awards to employees. Indeed, according to James, 'strangely', some employees believed that the Council may be giving the awards as 'a parting gift' to employees who would soon be losing their jobs, indicating that, when the belief that

new schemes should be viewed with suspicion interacts with employees' recent experiences of 'restructures' and 'funding cuts', there is the potential for employees to interpret the recognition they receive in unusual and unintended ways.

This potential for recipients to misunderstand or misinterpret gifts such as recognition is implied by signalling models of gift giving (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001) which view gifts as actions which convey information about how the donor perceives the recipient and their intentions for the relationship between them. In Chapter Five, I used such signalling models to draw out the communicative function of recognition in relation to Insurer employees' accounts of their recognition experiences. James' account above suggests that The Excellence Awards may be intended by Council X to fulfil a similar communicative function, signalling the extent to which the Council values its employees and their contributions. However, within this 'culture of suspicion', employees are mistrustful of the intended information signalled by the giving of recognition and may instead interpret the awards as signalling their imminent loss of employment ('well done and goodbye').

For James, however, The Excellence Awards are 'obviously a political thing', suggesting that he views the Council's decision to implement the scheme as based on self-serving motives. This description of the awards as 'political' is echoed by **Sandra** who, in her account of her experience of receiving an award, explains how she doubts that the award was 'really for [her] benefit' since she 'didn't actually get the sense that it was about [her] personally at all'.

> *Sandra: It was supposed to be about my contribution to the service but I think mine was a little bit political in that [the service] is the "in" thing, so I keep bearing that in mind. I do think that people valued the amount of commitment that I put into it and that I will go the extra mile to make sure the [team] are happy but I didn't get that from the award itself. I didn't actually get the sense that it was about me personally at all, you know, like it was really for my benefit. Nothing was said like we really value you because of this and you are outstanding because of this.*

Here, Sandra expresses a belief, shared by many interviewees and echoing employees at Insurer, that recognition should communicate to the recipient what the donor values about the recipient 'personally'. However, Sandra infers from the lack of information

she received regarding the reasons why she had been selected to receive the award that the award was not about her 'personally'. Her awareness that the service is 'the "in" thing' leads her to suspect that her award was 'political', an attempt by senior management to be seen by other Council employees and members of the public to value this politically "fashionable" service. Thus, she interprets the award as signalling the Council's positive perceptions of the service rather than conveying how she is 'value[d]' 'personally' as an individual.

Sandra's description of her award as 'supposed to be about my contribution to the service' is simultaneously a vague explanation which she has been given for why she has been chosen to receive the award and a reflection of her own tacit belief that recognition is 'supposed' to be about acknowledging the 'contribution' made by individuals and teams. In outlining what the recognition was lacking ('[n]othing was said like we really value you because of this and you are outstanding because of this'), Sandra expresses her belief that, for recognition to be successful in signalling the organisation's positive perception of the award recipient, it should communicate to the recipient what is valued about them 'personally'. As Blau (1964) notes, positive evaluations will only be experienced as rewarding for the individual if they are believed to be genuine. Indeed, in light of her awareness that her service is 'the "in" thing', the lack of information she received regarding the reasons why she had been selected to receive the award leads Sandra to suspect that her award was 'political' and therefore to doubt the sincerity of the positive evaluation of her 'contribution to the service' which was 'supposed' to be conveyed through the conferring of the recognition award.

A sense of mistrust towards the information signalled through the giving of awards by the Council is further evident in **Gordon's** account of his recognition experience.

> *Gordon: Cynically, I wonder exactly how much of this is trying to make the workforce feel valued, when actually we're going through a period where people are losing their jobs left, right and centre. That's what makes me uncomfortable with these sort of things to be honest. I think ultimately it's more of a PR scheme for the Council, to get paper coverage and the rest of it, than it is for the individual, to actually show genuine appreciation for individuals and groups. I know certainly some of the*

people who would have been included in the team didn't go at all because they feel the same way as me. I mean I only went because they allowed me to take my wife. If they hadn't allowed me to take my wife I wouldn't have gone. It was a bit of a night out. So certainly a good proportion of the, well the bulk of the group that won, that the award was aimed at, weren't there. And, I have to say, I know at least one other team that would have been included in the award that definitely said they weren't going because they don't believe in it.

In describing The Excellence Awards as 'more of a PR scheme for the Council', Gordon reinforces Sandra's 'sense' that her award was not 'really for [her] benefit'. Instead, Gordon implies, the scheme 'ultimately' serves the interests of the Council, helping it to get 'paper coverage' and cultivate a positive public image. Signalling models suggest that, by allocating awards to certain individuals and services, the Council signals its positive regard for and willingness to invest in these individuals and services (Camerer 1988). Thus, giving of recognition awards may be considered one way in which the Council constructs and maintains an image or identity for itself as an employer which values and invests in its employees, with its widely publicised formal scheme facilitating the external projection of this image (Schwartz 1967).

Gordon feels 'uncomfortable' with this public image of an organisation which values and invests in its workforce as it conflicts with his experiences of colleagues 'losing their jobs left, right and centre'. The way Gordon contrasts the Council's attempt to make employees 'feel' valued through its implementation of The Excellence Awards and the job cuts which are 'actually' happening suggests that he sees there being a "values-gap" between the Council's professed stance towards its employees and what it communicates about the degree to which it values employees through its relationships with and actions towards them. Such gaps erode trust in the organisation and give rise to cynicism (Preston 1994), as evidenced by the refusal of Gordon's colleagues to attend the awards ceremony 'because they don't believe in it'.

Previous research on the determinants of trust in public sector organisations has suggested a relationship between levels of organisational trust and employees' feelings about job security (Albrecht and Travaglione 2003; Carnevale and Wechseler 1992). This research suggests that trust requires, in part, that the individual feels secure about

their membership of the organisation. Carnevale and Wechsler argue that '[d]ecisions to trust the motives and intentions of organizational agents and to take risks in relation to the organization derive, in part, from beliefs about job security' (1992: 478). It follows that individuals who are confident that their jobs are secure will be more likely to develop trust in the organisation and its senior management than those who believe their jobs to be at risk (Carnevale and Wechsler 1992). Conversely, as illustrated by the accounts of James, Sandra and Gordon, a lack of job security is likely to inhibit the development of employees' trust in the organisation.

The importance of trust is also emphasised within both social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Gouldner 1960) and related psychological contract theory (Rousseau 1989, 2001). Exchange relationships require both parties to trust that the other will reciprocate for benefits received over time, and the meeting of obligations builds trust which, in turn, facilitates the ongoing exchange of benefits (Coyle-Shaprio and Parzefall 2008). Psychological contract theory applies the concept of reciprocal exchange to the analysis of the employment relationship. The psychological contract has been defined by Rousseau (1989) as the individual employee's subjective perceptions concerning the mutual obligations which exist between themselves and their employer. Such obligations may arise from the belief that each party has made either explicit or implicit promises to commit to particular actions or course of actions in relation to the other party.

Central to employees' perceptions of the state of the psychological contract are their perceptions about the fairness or unfairness of the organisation's human resource management practices (Shields 2007). Indeed, there is a significant body of literature concerned with the impact of perceived fairness in organisational procedures, interactions and outcomes on employee attitudes and behaviour (Bies and Moag 1986; Colquitt 2001; Colquitt et al. 2005; Folger and Bies 1989; Greenberg 1987; Leventhal 1980). Feelings of fairness or unfairness, known as organisational justice perceptions, have a major influence upon how employees respond to organisational practices and may affect trust in the organisation (Shields 2007; Wayne, Shore, Bommer and Tetrick 2002). If employees feel that the award allocation and processes are unfair or biased, this may erode confidence in the organisation and trust will decline (Carnevale and Weschler 1992). Conversely, fairness perceptions will also lead to increased levels of trust in the organisation (Carnevale and Weschler 1992).

Diminished levels of organisational trust were particularly evident in the accounts of several interviewees who expressed concerns regarding the "felt fairness" of the processes which lead to the allocation of recognition awards, termed procedural justice perceptions (Leventhal 1980). In the extract below, **Fiona** discusses how a lack of transparency around the judging process has led her to suspect that the awards may be 'a set-up' by the Council to highlight 'people engaged in specific high profile projects'.

> *Fiona: I suppose the biggest reservation I had about the awards scheme…was how the judging had taken place, it just wasn't tremendously transparent. I understand that the judging was done by a panel of people reading submissions of the nominators but beyond that it's all a bit vague…I felt that if you compare the first two [years that the scheme has been running], very similar people are getting awards. It's often people engaged in specific high profile projects clearly backed by the senior management who win. It just makes you kind of think, you know…actually this could be a bit of a set-up. I mean don't get me wrong, we are delighted that we've been shortlisted, but the important thing is that we were nominated by our communities who use our services, we got that recognition from them. That's when we know that we really made a difference. (Original emphasis)*

My own discussions with members of the administration team for The Excellence Awards revealed that the judges are not provided with a fixed set of criteria against which to judge the nominations in each category; each nomination is considered on its own merit and a decision on whether it should be progressed to the next stage is made by a majority vote. This judging process does not appear to be unusual; there are numerous examples of organisations employing similar methods to judge nominations discussed within the practitioner literature on employee recognition schemes (see, for example, Rose 2011). However, it is considered understandable that, within an organisational context where levels of organisational trust may already be diminished, employees would express a preference for greater clarity and transparency around the procedures which lead to the allocation of rewards.

Fiona states that, whilst her and her team are 'delighted' to be shortlisted for an award, they take greater meaning from the fact that they were nominated by the people who use the services which they provide because this recognition from members of the public communicates to them that they '*really* made a difference' (original emphasis). This positive evaluation of the work of the service by the 'communities who use [those] services' is experienced by Fiona as rewarding since is believed to be genuine (Blau 1964) in implied contrast to the awards conferred by the Council which are considered to be more indicative of which services or projects have the support of senior management than a judgement on the value of their work to the individuals who use these services.

Fiona's account indicates that a sense of procedural injustice has developed as a result of the perception that award allocation decisions are biased towards 'people engaged in specific high profile projects clearly backed by the senior management' according to a 'vague' judging procedure. Such feelings of procedural injustice are likely to prompt feelings of mistrust towards the scheme ('this could be a bit of a set-up') as well as towards the organisation as a whole and could lead to the belief that promises associated with the fair treatment of employees have been breached (Shields 2007).

According to Robinson, Kraaz and Rousseau (1994), psychological contract theory predicts that the failure of the organisation to meet its obligations to the employee may affect what that employee feels obligated to offer in return. Indeed, research has shown that, under such circumstances, employees may attempt to restore equity in the employment relationship by reducing effort and productivity (Akerlof 1982; Ederer and Fehr 2007) and engaging in other dysfunctional behaviours which can disrupt the effective and efficient operation of the organisation (Skarlicki and Folger 1997). This is consistent with Gouldner's norm of reciprocity which 'evokes obligations towards others on the basis of their past behavior' (1960: 170). Consequently, if employees perceive the organisation to have failed to have fulfilled its obligations to its employees, the employees' sense of indebtedness and mutual obligations should be reduced (Gould-Williams 2003).

The organisational changes which have taken place and continue to take place at Council X are likely to have had significant effects on employees' psychological contracts (Morrison and Robinson 1997). However, whilst the interviewee accounts

suggested that promises made by the organisation about job security and fair treatment of employees were perceived by employees to have been breached, contrary to the prediction of psychological contract theory, I found no evidence that employees had withdrawn effort and commitment as a result. Rather, the accounts of several interviewees, including **Yvonne** below, suggested that they had actually *increased* their contributions in response to the threat of job loss in order to demonstrate their value to the organisation.

> *Yvonne: I think motivation and people's feel good feeling about working for this organisation is probably pretty much at an all-time low at the moment. It has been for a number of years really. There has been jobs being lost and people have been in restructure, it's quite a frightening place to work, there is a lot of uncertainty and lack of security. Basically, at the moment I am trying to do everything I can to preserve myself really and that means working hard and working on the right things and raising your profile and getting that CV experience, you need it on there don't you? So [receiving an award] makes you feel a bit more confident and feel maybe a little bit more safe in whether you will be around or not the following year, if that makes sense. But I am not that naïve that you know, we are going through a restructure at the moment, I might get a job in the new structure but that might be only for another 12 months because we could be going through this again.*

Yvonne states that Council X is 'a frightening place to work' due to the lack of employment security it can offer to its employees. However, rather than attempting to restore equity to the employment relationship by withdrawing effort as previous studies have found (Akerlof 1982; Ederer and Fehr 2007), Yvonne responds to this lack of job security by attempting to demonstrate her value to the organisation by 'working hard and working on the right things and raising [her] profile'. For Yvonne, the recognition award she has been given signals the organisation's positive perceptions of her and willingness to invest in their relationship, making her feel 'a bit more confident' that she will keep her job in the current restructure. However, she is quick to add that she is 'not that naïve' to assume that the award guarantees her employment indefinitely. She states that, whilst she may keep her job in this

restructure, 'that might be only for another 12 months because we could be going through this again', suggesting her awareness that the Council's ability to maintain its investment in their relationship is constrained by external factors related to the Government's austerity measures.

Accounts such as Yvonne's which indicate that employees have increased their contributions despite the perception that organisation has broken its promise to offer relatively secure employment suggest that the psychological contract in the public sector is more complex than may be accounted for by the concept of reciprocal exchange. Consistent with this view is recent research by Conway et al. (2014) which found that job insecurity moderated the relationship between psychological contract breach and organisational citizenship behaviours in public sector employees. The authors suggest that the effects of psychological contract breach on employee contributions may be less apparent during a period of austerity and recession since employees are reluctant to further jeopardise their job security by withdrawing effort.

A further explanation for Council X employees not seeking to restore equity by withdrawing contributions when they perceive the organisation to have broken its promises to them is suggested by the concept of public sector motivation, defined as 'an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions or organizations' (Perry 1996: 6). Research has found that, compared with private-sector employees, employees in the public sector have a greater interest in altruistic or ideological goals such as providing a service to society and attach more value to intrinsic rewards such as a feeling of accomplishment and the belief that they are doing meaningful work (Houston 2000; Rainey 1982, 1997; Rayner et al. 2011; Wittmer 1991). Employees with strong public sector or service motivation may choose to maintain their contributions even when they perceive the organisation to have broken its promises towards them, as to refuse to do so would conflict with their commitment to the delivery of public services (Perry and Wise 1990; Conway et al. 2014). This reflects the findings of Guest and Conway's survey that many public sector workers have 'chosen to work in this sector and are committed to their work if not always to their employer (2001: 79).

In addition to potentially moderating the relationship between psychological contract breach and employee behaviour, the concept of public service motivation may explain

the preference for greater involvement by the service users in the scheme. In her account, **Nicola** explains how, whilst the recognition award she received as a result of nominations from colleagues or councillors was 'nice', recognition from the members of the public who use the services she provides is 'more valuable'.

> *Nicola: I mean I felt more heart warmed that it was written about me from the person that nominated me rather than receiving the award, you know, to think somebody thought that of you was a bigger reward then actually standing up and receiving a certificate…Even better would be if we could see how the residents thought of the service that you provided, that would be more valuable than the councillors, as nice as that is. So you know how do we involve our residents who we are serving, how do we get their feedback for recognition because again the value of that would be tenfold when Mrs Goggins who I would describe as our average resident has nominated you for a particular reason. I mean that is really heartening, that sort of thing, like thank you letters, that's a real buzz, it's a real buzz. I mean yes you do value your colleagues you work with but there are some assumptions that you are all working in the same organisation, you are all driving towards a common goal but involving the residents you actually serve, that's so much better.*

> *Charlotte: Ok, so you think that recognition which comes from members of the public is more valuable…*

> *Nicola: Yeah, absolutely. Because really you know you go into work, you get into this profession for a particular reason, like I said earlier, you know, I have a real passion about sort of trying to make things better for people, that's what sort of makes me tick, that is what makes me buzz. So in receiving that directly from somebody I have tried to help that isn't within the Council the buzz is so much different- it's real. Because you know they have come with a particular conundrum, problem, issue, you have put something in place or your team's put something in place usually and something's changed as a result of that. I mean, you know you can do all the goal setting and charts and everything you want but Mrs Goggins*

saying thanks very much that has really helped me blah blah blah, that's what matters to me.

Nicola suggests that, for her and others who chose to work at Council X because they have a 'real passion…to make things better for people', receiving recognition from members of the public who they have 'helped' through putting 'something in place' reinforces their feeling that they are engaged in meaningful work. She describes recognition coming from 'residents' as 'different' to recognition provided by co-workers or councillors as it is 'real', enabling her to access the perspective of individuals 'outside the Council' who are directly affected by her work. Thus, for Nicola, recognition is a powerful source of feedback about what 'the residents thought of the service [she] provided' and, therefore, how successful her efforts have been to 'make things better for people'. This informational value of recognition may increase Nicola's perceived self-determined competence, enhancing her intrinsic motivation further (Deci and Ryan 1985; Deci et al. 1999). Her account indicates that it is this real-life impact of her work on the residents who she serves which ultimately 'matters' to her, suggesting that recognition from service users is an important intrinsic reward for individuals with a strong sense of public service motivation.

Council X's decision to invite members of the public to nominate individuals and teams for recognition through The Excellence Awards scheme may therefore be considered an attempt to reinforce its employees' public service motivation. However, under the current scheme design, the comments made by the nominating individuals are not made available to nominees, thus limiting the potential for the informational value of the recognition to enhance the recipients' perceived self-competence. Indeed, the lack of information provided to nominees about who had nominated them and why they had been nominated was stated by the majority of interviewees in response to my question about what they disliked about the scheme.

Jane: I mean again the thing that was a bit odd about The Excellence Awards is that you get this nomination but you don't know who and why you have been nominated. So I emailed straight back and said well that's great but I would like to know who and why. And then they did send through the feedback which if I hadn't asked for it I wouldn't have seen. But I think that was the bit that actually, forget the award bit, it was the

personal bit, the personal comments that had come from the people in the business I had supported, that was the bit that I liked most.

In asking to be provided with further information regarding who had nominated her and the reasons they had given, **Jane** expresses her belief that recognition has the most value when it has a 'personal' dimension. She states that reading the 'personal' reasons which the nominating individuals gave for nominating her was the 'bit that [she] liked most' since these comments communicate how she is perceived by the individuals to whom she provides support. As previously discussed, recognition has a communicative function to convey information about how the donor perceives the recipient and their intentions for the relationship between them (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001). However, as Jane notes, due to issues of scheme design, this is information which, had she not asked to read the nominations, she would not have received.

It is therefore apparent that elements of the scheme design of The Excellence Awards are in conflict with employees' beliefs about the importance of a personal dimension to recognition, illustrating the potential difficulty facing organisations attempting to integrate the inherently personal social process of acknowledging a person's contribution, performance, dedication or engagement (Brun and Dugas 2008) within the mechanics of a formal employee recognition scheme. In assuming the role of recognition donor and downplaying the involvement of the nominators and their reasons for nominating, the Council constructs an identity for themselves as an organisation which values and invests in its workforce (Schwartz 1967). However, as both Jane and Sandra's accounts illustrate, recognition has the most value when it has a "face" or personal dimension. For recognition to be successful in signalling the donor's positive perceptions of and its willingness to invest in its relationship with the recipient, it needs to communicate to the recipient what the donor values about the recipient 'personally'. Although employees at Insurer also expressed a strong preference for personalised recognition, within this specific organisational context, this personal dimension to recognition takes on additional significance as it acts to persuade the recipient of the sincerity of the donor and, therefore, the trustworthiness of the information conveyed through the recognition award. The lack of detail regarding the reasons why recipients have been given the award has resulted in the recognition being experienced as rather impersonal and insincere, with many award

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recipients mistrusting the information which was intended by the organisation to be conveyed through the giving of recognition and instead interpreting their awards in unexpected and unintended ways.

6.4.1.1 Theme one summary/discussion

One of the most significant insights to be generated through this discussion of the theme 'there is a culture of suspicion' is how shared cultural beliefs about the appropriate way to act and respond to certain situations may influence how employees experience and understand employee recognition. Such beliefs motivated the interviewees to demonstrate a general attitude of cynicism towards The Excellence Awards, many voicing suspicions that the Council had some kind of 'ulterior motive' for implementing the scheme and for choosing them as an award recipient. The interaction of these suspicions with employees' recent experiences of organisational change in the form of 'restructures' and 'funding cuts' resulted in employees interpreting their awards in unintended, and sometimes unusual, ways.

The potential for misunderstanding in the giving and receiving of recognition is suggested by signalling models of gift giving which consider gifts to be actions which convey meaning but which may be interpreted by the recipient negatively or in ways which run contrary to the intentions of the donor (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001). However, as noted in Chapter Three, such models are vague about the conditions under which recipients may misinterpret or misunderstand the message conveyed through gift giving.

Therefore, the findings discussed in this theme extend signalling models by highlighting the mediating role of organisational context in determining how recipients interpret the messages conveyed through gifts. Consistent with Camerer's (1988) model, The Excellence Awards are considered to be used by Council X to convey to award recipients the extent to which the Council values them and their contributions and its willingness to invest in its relationships with them. However, this information is interpreted by recipients within a particular organisational context, which includes a unique organisational culture which determines the correct way for individuals to respond to and interpret such gifts. As a result, even though the intended message may be received by the recipient, they may mistrust this message because it conflicts with what is signalled by other actions by the organisation towards them. For

example, although receiving recognition may imply to the recipient that they have a bright future with the organisation (Wayne, Shore and Liden 1997), this impression is likely to be countered by the awareness that the organisation's ability to offer job security to its employees is constrained by external factors relating to the Government's austerity measures.

Employees' concerns about the fairness and transparency of the procedures were also found to have a profound influence on how they experienced and understood their awards. The concept of the psychological contract was used in order to draw out the implications of employees' feelings of procedural injustice for employee responses towards the scheme and their perceptions of the organisation. The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) which underpins psychological contract theory entails that the failure of the organisation to meet its obligations to the employee will affect what that employee feels obligated to offer in return. This prediction is supported by research showing that, under such circumstances, employees may modify their behaviour to restore equity in the employment relationship (Akerlof 1982; Ederer and Fehr 2007; Skarlicki and Folger 1997).

However, contrary to this prediction, the interviewees' accounts suggested that they had actually *increased* their effort and contributions in order to demonstrate their value to the organisation. This somewhat surprising finding may be explained by recent research by Conway et al. (2014) which investigated job insecurity and public sector motivation as moderators of public sector employees' reactions to psychological contract breach. Employees may choose to maintain their contributions even when they perceive the organisation to have broken its promises or acted unfairly towards them as to refuse to do so might further jeopardise their employment status (Conway et al. 2014) and, for those with a strong public service motivation, would conflict with their commitment to the delivery of public services (Perry and Wise 1990; Conway et al. 2014).

Furthermore, echoing the findings of the interviews with employees at Insurer, the interviewees' accounts highlighted the potential for individuals' recognition experiences to be negatively affected in circumstances where employees' personal beliefs about what recognition is and how it should be provided come into conflict with the mechanics of a formal employee recognition scheme. The interviewees'

accounts indicated a shared belief that, for recognition to be successful in signalling the donor's positive regard for and willingness to invest in its relationship with the recipient, it should communicate to the recipient what the donor values about the recipient 'personally'. However, whilst nominating individuals are asked to explain what the individual or team did which impressed or made a difference to them personally in their nomination, under the current scheme design, nominated individuals are not automatically provided with this or any detailed information regarding the reasons why they have been chosen to receive the award. This lack of a personal dimension to the recognition has resulted in some award recipients failing to be persuaded the Council genuinely values them as an individual and, instead, suspecting that their awards were intended to serve some 'political' objective. This finding highlights how the success of recognition is highly dependent on the synergy of the scheme design with employees' personal beliefs about how recognition should be provided.

A related insight generated by the discussion of this theme is the preference expressed by interviewees for recognition to be provided by members of the public who use the services which they provide. Recognition from service users was considered valuable by interviewees as it provides feedback about the impact of their work on the lives of the people in their communities and reinforces their feeling that they are engaged in meaningful work, suggesting that recognition from service users is an important intrinsic reward for individuals with a strong sense of public service motivation. Recognition which is informational and communicates how the recipient has made a difference to the donor personally is more likely to be experienced by the recipient as rewarding, and may also increase perceived self-determined competence and enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985; Deci et al. 1999). This strongly suggests that public sector organisations should respond to this unique public service ethos of its employees by designing practices and strategies which more easily allow for employees to be appreciated by service users (Wittmer 1991). Increased involvement from service users may also have the added benefit of avoiding the perception of bias in award allocation decisions and increasing employees' perceptions of the overall fairness of the scheme.

In addition to those implied in the discussion above, there are two main practical implications of the above findings.

Firstly, the findings support the work of Feys et al. (2013) who argue that managers and organisations should implement recognition schemes as motivational strategies only under certain well-defined conditions. Indeed, organisations who have recently undergone or are undergoing organisational change should be aware of the ways in which changes such as employment insecurity may lead employees to interpret and respond to human resource management practices such as employee recognition schemes in ways which are unexpected and unintended by the organisation.

Secondly, there is an increased need for transparency around human resource management practices in organisations where levels of trust towards the organisation are already diminished as a result of organisational change. As illustrated by the interviewees' accounts, it is likely that, during or following organisational change, the fairness of human resource management practices will come under closer scrutiny from employees. Therefore, organisations should consider ways in which they can enhance the clarity and transparency of the processes which lead to the allocation of rewards. Such considerations are of central importance as employee perceptions of the fairness or unfairness of human resource management practices are closely related to organisational trust (Carnevale and Weschler 1992).

6.4.2   Theme two: 'we're all one organisation'

This theme is defined by the interviewees' understanding of The Excellence Awards, as, on the one hand, promoting a sense of unity and solidarity with other individuals and teams across the Council by boosting awareness of the work performed in different areas and, on the other hand, posing a threat to such solidarity by selecting certain individuals and teams for recognition over others.

The awards ceremony in particular was perceived by the majority of interviewees as having an important social function to bring together individuals and teams who would perhaps not normally come into contact with one another to celebrate what the Council has collectively achieved over the previous year, as illustrated by **James'** account below.

> *James: As I say, it's nice for people to let their hair down a bit I think and sit back and say "yeah actually we have done good stuff" and to learn about the other stuff that people are doing because you don't always see*

that. With us being split around buildings at the minute we don't, not so much work in isolation, but certainly directorates work quite isolated from each other, so you don't really realise what other bits the Council do. I mean for example I got into a taxi once and as soon as I said I work for the Council you get a big moan about potholes and the bins not being emptied and things….I don't know anything about that. But to be a little bit more involved in the organisation as a whole I think is a good thing…like there was a lollipop lady, when she came to the awards ceremony she had no idea of the other jobs that we did, you know she had never met us before, she had just been there with her lollipop every day for years, she'd never seen the rest of the people who work in the Council. So it was nice to meet her and, you know, bring her into the forefront a little bit so she could see she was part of something a bit bigger.

James suggests that Council employees' awareness and understanding of the work going on in different parts of the Council is restricted by the spread of Council buildings across the City which limits interactions between employees from different directorates. He implies that the award ceremony is a way of overcoming these geographical barriers, bringing employees from all different areas of the Council together in one room to 'learn about the stuff that other people are doing' outside of their immediate team or service. He employs the example of the lollipop lady to illustrate how such events may have positive social implications, giving individuals a greater sense of belonging within the organisation and the belief that they are contributing to 'something a bit bigger'.

Indeed, the potential for attendees to derive social benefits from attending the award ceremony is evident in **David's** account of how the personal connections he made with individuals at the event have made it easier to approach them in a work capacity.

David: It's weird, I think it kind of made people more aware of what we did as a job as well because people can find out what we do. You know, obviously they have got their own jobs that they need to get on with, so something like that where it is not in work time, it's in [a non-Council venue] and it is a relaxed atmosphere and you're just chatting, people can actually really take a bit more of an interest in what you do and think "god

that must be quite difficult"…It's brought a face to a name as well actually because in lots of ways we are a completely faceless department almost so when people get to see us they can say "oh yeah you were at the awards the other week". It's weird it effects things in that way isn't it? There are like certain side effects which you don't think, you don't expect they'll actually happen just from having a night together with a load of people. Like since that night I have felt a bit more comfortable walking into [another Council building] … and whereas I might not have known anyone before, now people remember my face from the awards and say hello, it's nice. So in that way I think these awards have tried to break down barriers between people.

Like James, David suggests that the award ceremony provides an opportunity for Council employees to find out about the work performed by others and to better appreciate the challenges facing them in their roles. He states that the event helps employees to put 'a face to a name', implying that, whereas previously he may have only interacted with employees outside his department virtually, meeting them face-to-face can help them to relate to him as a real person, rather than purely as his organisational function. He still expresses surprise, however, that, after attending the awards ceremony, he feels more confident moving around other Council buildings as, when he does, he receives acknowledgement from other individuals who also attended the event. Such small interpersonal gestures are expressions of an existential approach to recognition, discussed by Brun and Dugas, which is based on 'recognition of the person as a dignified, equal, free, and unique being who has needs' (2008: 727) and are experienced as rewarding by David as they convey to him that he is recognised and respected as a whole person, rather than simply for his work function.

Thus, for David, the awards ceremony contributes to 'break[ing] down barriers between people', created by the geographical spread of employees across the City (as suggested by James) and the virtual nature of work performed by some employees, which restrict personal interaction between employees working in different areas of the Council. Furthermore, David's account suggests that, by bringing together employees from different areas of the Council to participate in and witness the conferring of awards on individuals and teams in a celebratory atmosphere, the awards

ceremony facilitates the initiation of social connections between individuals based on mutual respect and appreciation of their contributions to the Council.

As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the giving and receiving of e-thank you cards by employees at Insurer, there is a significant body of literature in organisational studies which has applied the concept of social capital in the explanation of how such interpersonal relationships may deliver benefits both for individuals and organisations (see Adler and Kwon 2002). Within this literature, social capital is generally conceived of as a network of interpersonal relationships which ultimately benefit the individual through facilitating access to sources of information, providing a means of accruing influence and power over others, and providing a sense of solidarity based on shared social norms and beliefs (Adler and Kwon 2002; Burt 1997; Coleman 1988; Sandefur and Laumann 1998).

Whilst at Insurer, social capital is potentially created through the exchange of e-thank you cards, at Council X, it is the awards ceremony itself which physically draws employees together, creating a 'relaxed atmosphere' which encourages employees to make social connections. If these social connections between employees working in different areas of the Council cultivate a sense of mutual respect and trust between them, and if the individuals use this this shared respect for and trust in each other to share knowledge and ideas and work more collaboratively, then the interactions may be considered to have created positive social capital which has been used to enable superior performance (Baker and Dutton 2007). Such performance improvements may, in turn, translate into beneficial consequences for the organisation and external stakeholders, in this case members of the public (Adler and Kwon 2002). This suggests that events such as the awards ceremony which bring employees from different areas of the Council together and provide them with an opportunity to create social connections with other employees may fulfil an important function in creating the conditions for the creation of positive social capital in the organisation.

For several interviewees, the awards ceremony was also an opportunity to create personal connections with members of senior management and external stakeholders. In the extract below, **Ruth** describes how she perceives the awards ceremony as helping to overcome hierarchical barriers which prevent interaction between individuals at different levels of seniority within the organisation.

> *Ruth: And I actually think it was nice for the whole of the Council to get together and celebrate it together because it's not only just about [our team], it's about celebrating other people's successes which is good. So these awards, they bring us all together. It's nice when you can all sort of mix and mingle with everybody. On those nights there is no hierarchy. And I mean there was the Lord Mayor there, there were councillors, there was external companies and it's about saying we're all one organisation, you know.*

For Ruth, events which bring individuals from all levels of the organisational hierarchy together with external companies under one roof to celebrate the successes of individuals and teams across the Council are a way for the Council to demonstrate to its employees that, regardless of their level in the organisational hierarchy or the particular job they perform, they are all part of the same organisation contributing to the same ultimate goal of public service.

On the evening, I noticed that the Council attempted to reinforce employees' sense that they are part of 'one organisation' through seating individuals from different levels of the organisation together at the same table, senior management with library workers, lollipop ladies with councillors, encouraging interaction between individuals who perhaps would be unlikely to meet outside of the event and promoting a sense of solidarity. As evident from **David's** account below, this seating configuration also facilitated the recognition of employees by members of senior management.

> *David: On the night we were sat with the directors, so I had [the director of the area] sat next to me and I've never met him before in my life and I got chatting with him, chatting away and it was nice, he said "you guys always do a really good job so it's good that you have been nominated" and that kind of thing.*

Studies have shown that visibility to and recognition from senior management influence employees' perceptions concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Wayne et al. 1997; Wayne et al. 2002). As discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter, such perceptions of organisational support increases employees' felt obligation to reciprocate through higher levels of organisational commitment and lower levels of absenteeism

(Eisenberger et al. 1986; Eisenberger et al. 2002). Previous studies have taken the view that visibility to and recognition from senior management are discretionary rewards which are given to a small number of employees only and signal employer investment in the employee (Wayne et al. 2002). Thus, perceived organisational support theory predicts that employees who perceive themselves to have received more recognition from and visibility to senior management than their peers through attending The Excellence Awards ceremony will perceive higher levels of organisational support and consequently demonstrate higher levels of commitment towards the organisation.

However, it was evident from the accounts of several interviewees that the experience of being singled out personally for recognition provoked more complex emotional responses in recipients than can be accounted for by perceived organisational support theory. Several interviewees who received individual awards expressed discomfort and ambivalence about being recognised for personal achievements or contributions, often attempting to re-focus the attention away from them and towards their colleagues or the work of the service a whole. For example, **James**, who won an award for his work with a particular service, states that he has 'been careful to detach [himself] from personally receiving it' because he sees it 'more as a thumbs up for the service than [him] personally'.

> *James: So, how I saw the award, it was not so much my award as the award for the service itself, so I have been careful to detach myself from personally receiving it, if you see what I mean… As I say, I see it more as a thumbs up for the service than me personally. I just do my job. So, for me, it was the service that was receiving the award rather than anything else and that's what has been successful. I think too much maybe there is a perception that these things are driven more by people like myself but really we are just facilitators and that is why I can't take the credit for it because my job is to facilitate how the public want to drive [the service] … As I say it was the service itself that won the award not any one person specifically, or I like to think that, and, with what I do, it is very, very important that the profile is always up and out there because, in these times of massive cutbacks, there might be things, lots more services like mine maybe get a bit lost in the ether of it all and we need to be sort of*

waving the flag and saying "no we are still here", you know, "we are still delivering this".

The way James emphatically repeats that it was the service which won the award rather than him or 'any one person specifically' reflects his acute awareness of the importance of raising and maintaining a high profile for the service and what it is 'delivering' in 'these times of massive cutbacks'. James' efforts to 'detach' himself from the award in order to highlight the value of the work performed by the service is consistent with studies which have found that public sector employees attach less importance to status and prestige than do private sector employees (Jurkiewicz et al. 1998; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991) and have a greater interest in altruistic or ideological goals such as providing a service to society (Houston 2000; Rainey 1982, 1997; Rayner et al. 2011). Indeed, James consciously downplays his own role in the success of the service ('I just do my job'), stating that his job is to 'facilitate how the public want to drive [the service]'. To take 'the credit' for the success of the service would conflict with the way James sees himself as a 'facilitator' of a public service rather than someone who has 'driven' the project according to their own personal motivations and priorities.

A sense of discomfort about receiving an award for her contribution as an individual rather than part of a team delivering a public service is further evident in **Nicola's** account below. Like James, Nicola is aware of the importance of promoting the work performed by her service so is disappointed that she was unable to share her award with the rest of her team as she views her success as a manager as 'a reflection of what [they] are achieving as a team'. Indeed, Nicola's high level of identification with her team is in line with research which has shown that groups facing a common threat may demonstrate a significant increase in group solidarity (Janis 1963; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif 1961).

Nicola: I have always, you know, tried to get my team in the limelight to show this is what we do and this is the difference we are making, so the only thing I should say is that at the award ceremony when you received your certificate there wasn't a chance to sort of say "I would like to thank..." ... and in that speech I'd have quite firmly said "it isn't my award, it is my team's award" because it is a reflection on what we are

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achieving as a team… Because you know as a manager you are only as strong as your team that are behind you and if I don't have a strong team then you know we don't achieve what we do…I mean I find it all very uncomfortable anyway because I think I came into this sort of work because I'm passionate about trying to make a difference to local people. It's not a job that you do…where you want lots of recognition if that makes sense. It is a service-led reason why you are doing it. You are, you know, listening to people and then trying to put things in place. So, from that perspective, it does feel quite uncomfortable…

Here, Nicola explains how she finds receiving external acknowledgement and recognition for her contribution to the service 'uncomfortable' generally as it conflicts with her internal motivation for working in the public sector. Her description of her reasons for entering into the public sector are supportive of the concept of public sector motivation, defined as 'an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions or organizations' (Perry 1996: 6). In stating that this is not a job 'where you want lots of recognition', she suggests that she attaches little importance to status and prestige (Jurkiewicz et al. 1998; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991). Instead, she has a 'service-led reason' for doing the job, a passion for 'trying to make a difference to local people'.

A related explanation for the discomfort Nicola experiences as a result of receiving a recognition award is suggested by attribution (Kelley 1967) and self-perception (Bem 1967) theories which propose that individuals make post-behavioural inferences about the causes of their own behaviour based on the conditions in which it occurred. In the presence of external controls (such as a recognition award), an individual attributes their behaviour to these external circumstances but if these external controls are not perceived (or if they are psychologically insufficient to account for behaviour), behaviour is attributed to internal motivation. If an individual is rewarded for doing something which they already enjoy doing, they may infer that their behaviour was motivated by the external reward rather than by any intrinsic interest in the activity. Since Nicola's account suggests that she has a strong public service motivation, it is unlikely that receiving a recognition award would be psychologically sufficient to cause her to attribute her behaviour to the pursuit of an award. Nonetheless, her discomfort may be explained by the way receiving a recognition award for her

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contributions threatens her understanding of her behaviour as entirely internally motivated.

In addition to provoking internal conflicts in some recipients, other interviewee accounts suggest that, although a source of personal pride and satisfaction, being selected to receive an award over their immediate colleagues or other Council employees may create interpersonal dilemmas for recipients. In the extract below, **Fiona** explains how being 'singled out' for recognition when others were also delivering good work made her feel 'embarrassed'.

> *Fiona: So I recognised yes I have done a good piece of work and I think I have always taken pride in my work and delivered good pieces of work for people but I still felt quite embarrassed about it all because I know there are many other people who do good pieces of work who go unrecognised. Although it is nice to be recognised I just didn't want to be singled out. I just felt it was a bit divisive.*
>
> *Charlotte: Right, ok. Why do you think...?*
>
> *Fiona: Just in terms of the fact that one person got this award but a lot of people might have been long-listed, a number were shortlisted and I didn't feel that my piece of work was necessarily any more valuable to the organisation than anybody else's. I mean I didn't know what specifically the others who had been shortlisted had done, but I was equally sure that they had done good work too. You know, they weren't there on the shortlist because they were delivering poor work, they were obviously delivering good work. So I did feel it was a little bit divisive. I felt sorry for those people who hadn't won but had done good work, but equally felt that there were people out there who had done very good work that nobody else had taken the time to recognise.*

Fiona describes the way she was 'singled out' for recognition as 'a bit divisive', suggesting that she is concerned the practice of giving awards to certain individuals and teams over others may potentially create interpersonal conflicts and threaten employees' sense of solidarity. Her sense of embarrassment stems from her awareness that other individuals had also produced good pieces of work and had not received an award, implying that she is concerned that they, like she, may be wondering why she

had been recognised over them when her work was no more 'valuable to the organisation than anybody else's'.

Such concerns about being 'singled out' for recognition are puzzling from the perspective of early incarnations of social comparison theory (Festinger 1954). Early research focused on how individuals seek to achieve their self-enhancement goals by making downward comparisons, comparing their own superior performance with someone who has not performed as well (Willis 1981). Therefore, by communicating the individual's superior status, public recognition (such as the kind given through The Excellence Awards) should facilitate these self-enhancing downward comparisons which can be a source of considerable pleasure and pride for the individual (Exline et al. 2004).

However, more recent work on social comparison theory has examined the consequences of being the target of upward comparisons, where an individual compares themselves with an individual who they perceive is superior to them in some way (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004; Henagan 2010; Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2010). The term "sensitivity about being the target of a threatening upwards comparison" (STTUC) is used by Exline and Lobel (1999) to refer to the discomfort experienced by individuals who are concerned about how their achievements might pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their own interpersonal relationships. In the STTUC framework (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004), "outperformance-related distress" may be expressed through a variety of different behavioural responses, such as individuals downplaying their superior status and reducing their own effort to reduce others' perceived status inadequacies, and emotional responses such as expressing sympathy for those who they have outperformed, as can be seen in **Sandra's** account below.

> *Sandra: ...I think speaking honestly I do think I'm worthy of it because I do a lot of out of hours work and I do a lot of work that's just not recognised and people wouldn't know that I do, but the scheme couldn't work if I didn't do that and it's because I am passionate about what I do that I am prepared to do that...But, I keep saying, I don't think there's just me who does that. I think there's lots and lots and lots of people across the Council who really go that extra mile to make sure that the Council runs*

smoothly. So you feel like yeah it's nice and you understand why you have been nominated but it's just a shame that there are so many that don't get that recognition as well. It makes me sound very ungrateful, doesn't it? So yeah maybe if it had been done privately I would have felt better accepting it.

Sandra's comment that 'maybe if it had been done privately I would have felt better accepting it' is consistent with the STTUC framework which predicts that individuals will want to avoid having their achievements highlighted in ways which could prompt negative reactions from those who they have outperformed (Exline et al. 2004). She implies that, had the recognition been delivered to her privately, she would have felt less anxiety about how her achievement might pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, thus reducing her discomfort.

Indeed, the influence of situational factors on individuals' emotional reactions to outperforming others is emphasised by Exline and Lobel (1999). In particular, the authors highlight culture as a key factor influencing individuals' susceptibility to STTUC, suggesting that members of collectivist cultures which emphasise interconnectedness are likely to experience more distress than members of individualistic cultures which tend to reward independence and personal achievement. The discomfort evident in the above interviewee accounts may, therefore, be a consequence of the conflict between interviewees' heightened sense of solidarity in the context of organisational change and the way the scheme ultimately serves to highlight and reward the exceptional achievements of particular individuals and teams over others. This is a key finding of this research as it suggests that there may be possible negative social implications for individuals who are 'singled out' for recognition, as well as for their co-workers who 'go unrecognised' within certain organisational contexts.

6.4.2.1 Theme two summary/discussion

This discussion of the theme 'we're all one organisation' has primarily focused on the interviewees' perceptions of The Excellence Awards ceremony in order to highlight further important social functions and implications of employee recognition. The ceremony itself was a key part of the interviewees' recognition experiences and therefore exerted a strong influence over how the employees made sense of the

recognition they received. Many emphasised the important social function fulfilled by the event to provide an opportunity for individuals and teams who would perhaps not normally come into contact with one another to unite for one evening to celebrate what the Council had collectively achieved over the previous year. The event was also perceived by interviewees to generate a number of social benefits for attendees, including a greater sense of belonging within the organisation and recognition that, through performing their individual role, they are contributing to the success of 'something a bit bigger'.

The conscious decision to seat individuals from different areas and levels of the organisation together at the same table was viewed by interviewees as encouraging interaction between individuals who perhaps would be unlikely to meet outside of the event and promoting a sense of unity and solidarity between Council employees. This seating configuration also facilitated the informal recognition of employees by members of senior management, which studies have shown affects employees' perceptions concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Wayne et al. 1997; Wayne et al. 2002). Such perceptions of organisational support increase employees' felt obligation to reciprocate through higher levels of organisational commitment and lower levels of absenteeism (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Eisenberger et al. 2002). Thus, recognition from and visibility to senior management may contribute to employees' perceived organisational support and consequently influencing employees' levels of organisational commitment and attitudes towards the organisation.

Furthermore, the accounts indicate that, by involving members of the Council from all areas and at all levels, as well as external stakeholders, the event provides opportunities for employees to create, maintain and renew social connections with other individuals across the Council, overcoming barriers (geographical and hierarchical) which otherwise restrict personal interaction between employees working in different areas of the Council. This lends further support to the suggestion, discussed in the previous chapter, that, employee recognition may provide the conditions for the creation of social capital by helping to establish connections between colleagues, and creating a network of interdependent social relationships which can provide access to information, resources, support and influence. Such social capital benefits not just the individual members of the network but the organisation

which employs these individuals, through their enhanced capabilities to search for and access resources and information which can be used to achieve organisational objectives.

However, as the award ceremony is only attended by a small proportion of the Council's approximately 7,000 employees, it should be considered as just one possible means by which the organisation might foster social capital by providing all of its employees with the motivation and opportunities to create and maintain social connections. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter Five, social capital inheres within interactions between individuals (Waldstrøm 2003), therefore, if a relationship breaks down or one of the parties leaves the organisation, thus terminating the relationship, the social capital embedded within that relationship is likely to be lost. Clearly, during periods of organisational change, there is an increased potential for social capital to be lost as a result of job losses. Therefore, for Council X, there is an even greater need for events such as The Excellence Awards ceremony which promote a sense of unity and provide opportunities for employees to create, maintain and renew social connections with other individuals across the Council based on mutual respect and appreciation of their contributions to the organisation.

Although the interviewees' accounts indicated that the interviewees derived a number of social benefits from receiving recognition, many who received individual awards expressed discomfort about being recognised for their personal achievements or contributions. Several potential explanations for the interviewees' ambivalence towards receiving recognition were explored, including the possibility that receiving external acknowledgement and recognition for their contributions conflict with their public sector motivation and threaten their understanding of their own behaviour as entirely internally motivated.

The concept of "sensitivity about being a target of threatening upward comparison" (STTUC) (Exline and Lobel 1999) was also used to draw out the potential negative social implications of receiving recognition. Although none of the interviewees reported experiencing hostility or resentment from their colleagues following their award, as several previous studies have found (Carusetta 2001; Exline et al. 2004; Mackenzie 2007; Warren and Plumb 1999), some award recipients expressed their concerns about how their achievements might pose a threat to others' self-esteem and

self-worth, and their own interpersonal relationships, through attempting to re-define their individual successes as collective achievements and demonstrating sympathy for individuals who they had outperformed.

The application of the concept of STTUC to the study of employee experiences of recognition has important practical implications, revealing how recognition may have interpersonal costs for recipients. Furthermore, as Exline and Lobel (1999) note, culture is an important factor in influencing individuals' susceptibility to STTUC, suggesting that, where employees develop a heightened sense of solidarity during periods of organisational change, organisations should be aware that there is an increased likelihood of award recipients experiencing feelings of discomfort when their superior performance is highlighted through a receiving a public recognition award.

Practically speaking, this suggests that, although public recognition (such as the kind given through The Excellence Awards), through communicating the individual's superior status, should facilitate self-enhancing downward comparisons which can be a source of considerable pleasure and pride for the individual (Exline et al. 2004), there are situations in which private recognition may be favourable to public recognition. Recognition which is delivered privately to recipients may allow organisations to recognise high-performing individuals and teams whilst avoiding the potential negative social implications discussed above.

6.5   Chapter conclusion

This chapter started with a short overview of the public sector setting for this research, before summarising the Council X's customer service awards scheme, The Excellence Awards, including the nomination process and the awards ceremony, in order to contextualise the recognition experiences discussed in this chapter. Next, the findings of the thematic analysis of the transcripts of the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences were presented. The first theme I identified is 'there is a culture of suspicion' which highlights the ways in which employees' own experiences of working in the public sector influence the ways in which they experience and understand recognition, and their beliefs about how recognition should communicate what the donor values about the recipient as an individual and the scheme should be managed transparently and with greater involvement from the service users. The

second theme is 'we're all one organisation', drawing together several different beliefs held by interviewees about the ways in which The Excellence Awards, the awards ceremony in particular, can promote a sense of unity and solidarity with other individuals and teams across the Council by boosting awareness of the work performed in different areas, whilst at the same time posing a threat to such solidarity by selecting certain individuals and teams for recognition over others. These two themes are considered to represent key perceptions and beliefs held by employees which contribute to their understandings of their experiences of recognition in the workplace. These empirical insights were supported with extracts from the interview transcripts and were discussed in relation to theories of gift giving and other relevant literatures. I concluded each theme by summarising the main insights generated through the discussion of the theme and outlining the practical implications of the findings.

The purpose of this final section is to reflect upon how the findings discussed in the preceding chapter address each of the three research questions identified at the start of this thesis. Further implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed in the next and final chapter of this thesis.

6.5.1 How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?

Through my thematic analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with employees at Council X about their recognition experiences, I have been able to identify some of the key factors influencing employees' experiences of recognition, thus contributing to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees.

At Council X, employees interpreted their awards and The Excellence Awards more broadly in complex and, at times, surprising ways, but always with reference to the specific organisational context in which they operated. Employees' experiences of working in the public sector during such a significant period of organisational change exerted a profound influence upon how they experienced and understood their recognition experiences. Where the information signalled by the Council through the giving of recognition about the degree to which the Council values and is willing to invest in its employees conflicted with their recent experiences of job losses and

funding cuts, the result was an overall sense of cynicism towards the recognition scheme.

Such cynicism was considered a manifestation of shared cultural beliefs about the appropriate way to respond to new initiatives within the public sector. The organisational culture, described by one interviewee as 'a culture of suspicion', motivated the interviewees to demonstrate a general attitude of mistrust and cynicism towards The Excellence Awards. Furthermore, a heightened sense of suspicion around the Council's motives for giving recognition can lead employees to interpret the recognition they receive in unusual and unintended ways. Thus, one of the key findings of the interviews I conducted at Council X is the importance of the organisational context, including shared cultural beliefs about the appropriate way for employees to act and respond to certain situations, in understanding how employees experience and understand recognition in the workplace.

Furthermore, echoing the findings of interviews conducted at Insurer, the findings of the interviews conducted at Council X revealed that recognition scheme design is an important factor in determining the ways in which individuals understand their recognition experiences and the value which recipients derive from their awards. In particular, it is important that the scheme design works in synergy with employees' personal beliefs about how recognition should be provided. For example, the employees expressed a shared belief that, for recognition to be successful in signalling the donor's positive regard for and willingness to invest in its relationship with the recipient, it should communicate to the recipient what the donor values about the recipient 'personally'. However, the way The Excellence Awards is currently designed, the comments made by the nominating individuals are not automatically made available to nominees, thus limiting the potential for the informational value of the recognition award to enhance the recipients' perceived self-competence and resulting in its failure to persuade the recipient of the sincerity of the donor and, therefore, the information conveyed through the recognition. Therefore, scheme design, specifically the degree to which the scheme design works in harmony with employees' personal beliefs about what recognition is and how it should be provided, is an important factor mediating employees' experiences of recognition.

In addition the scheme design, the findings discussed in this chapter suggest that employees' experiences of recognition are mediated by the ways in which the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation. In particular, employees' concerns about the fairness and transparency of the procedures were found to have a significant influence on how they experienced and understood their awards, leading some interviewees to suspect that the scheme may be biased towards certain individuals and groups who have the support of Council senior management. Within this organisational context where levels of organisational trust may already be diminished as a result of organisational change, the influence of feelings of procedural injustice on employees' experiences of recognition is considered likely to be even stronger, stressing the need for organisations undergoing organisational change to build greater clarity and transparency into the procedures which lead to the allocation of rewards.

Finally, the way in which recognition was delivered to recipients is a further significant factor influencing the ways in which employees experienced and understood the recognition they received. The Excellence Awards ceremony itself was a key part of the interviewees' recognition experiences, facilitating the public recognition of their achievements and generating other social benefits. Public recognition which highlights the individual's superior performance may facilitate self-enhancing downward comparisons which can be a source of considerable pleasure and pride for the individual (Exline et al. 2004). However, where the individual feels a strong sense of solidarity with their colleagues, this kind of public recognition may contribute to the individual's sense of discomfort as a result of perceiving themselves to be a target of a threatening upward comparison (Exline and Lobel 1999). Recognition which is delivered privately to recipients, by comparison, may facilitate self-enhancing downward comparisons whilst avoiding the potential negative social implications.

The findings discussed in this chapter contribute to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees by illustrating how a range of factors including the organisational context, the scheme design, the way in which the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation and the way in which recognition is delivered to recipients mediate individuals' experiences of recognition.

6.5.2 What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?

My interpretation of Council X employees' accounts of their recognition experiences in this chapter has highlighted that, whilst employee may fulfil several important social functions, it may have both positive and negative social implications in the workplace.

Firstly, the findings discussed in this chapter support signalling interpretations of gift giving by illustrating the communicative function of The Excellence Awards scheme in signalling the Council's positive regard for and willingness to invest in certain individuals and services. Furthermore, the giving of recognition awards may be considered one way in which the Council constructs and maintains an image or identity for itself as an employer which values and invests in its employees, with its widely publicised formal scheme facilitating the external projection of this image (Schwartz 1967).

The role of employee recognition in communicating information is also apparent in the accounts of interviewees emphasising the importance of recognition from service users. Recognition from members of the public is particularly valued by employees as it conveys information about the service user's perceptions of them, provides feedback about the impact of their work on the lives of the people in their communities and reinforces their feeling that they are engaged in meaningful work.

Secondly, The Excellence Awards ceremony itself was considered by employees to fulfil an important social function to promote a sense of unity and solidarity within the Council by providing an opportunity for individuals and teams who would perhaps not normally come into contact with one another to unite for one evening to celebrate what the Council had collectively achieved over the previous year. The seating configuration which placed individuals from different areas and levels of the organisation together at the same table was identified as a key way in which the organisation created a sense of employees being 'all one organisation'.

Indeed, the interviewees' accounts indicated that a further positive social implication of attending the awards ceremony may be the creation, maintenance and renewal of social connections between members of the Council from all areas and at all levels, as well as external stakeholders. Thus, as discussed in Chapter Five, by helping to establish connections between colleagues, and creating a network of interdependent

social relationships which can provide access to information, resources, support and influence, employee recognition may provide the conditions for the creation of social capital (Baker and Dutton 2007).

However, the findings discussed in this chapter also highlighted potential negative social implications of employee recognition, suggesting that even well-intentioned attempts by the organisation to recognise and reward exceptional performance may produce unexpected and undesired effects. Individuals may experience discomfort, embarrassment or guilt as a result of receiving recognition when they perceive such external acknowledgement and recognition of their contributions to conflict with their public sector motivation and threaten their understanding of their own behaviour as entirely internally motivated, or feel that their achievements may pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their interpersonal relationships. Individuals may express this "outperformance distress" through a range of different emotional reactions, such as expressing sympathy for those who they have outperformed, and behavioural responses such as downplaying their superior status and reducing their own effort to reduce others' perceived status inadequacies (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004) which may disrupt the effective and efficient operation of the organisation.

Overall, the findings discussed in this chapter expand knowledge of the social functions and implications of employee recognition by highlighting how recognition may have both benefits and costs for recipients. On the one hand, recognition awards may be a source of considerable pleasure and pride for recipients and, on the other, generate feelings of discomfort emanating from concerns about how their achievement affects outperformed others, and their relationship. Furthermore, the interviewee accounts discussed in this chapter suggest that these sorts of concerns about being singled out for individual recognition may be particularly intensified in organisational contexts which otherwise promote the importance of solidarity between employees through their organisational culture and human resource management practices.

6.5.3   What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

The application of signalling theories in my interpretation of Council X employees' accounts of their recognition experiences reveals that employee recognition may have a communicative function to signal information about the donor's perceptions of the

recipient and their willingness to invest in the relationship. Signalling models suggest that, by allocating awards to certain individuals and services, the Council signals its positive regard for and willingness to invest in these individuals and services (Camerer 1988). Indeed, the high value which the interviewees place on recognition from service users further supports such signalling interpretations of gift giving. The interviewees' accounts indicate that recognition from members of the public is a powerful source of positive feedback on the impact of their work on the lives of the people in their communities which reinforces their feeling that they are engaged in meaningful work. Thus, the insights generated through the application of signalling theories enhance the study of employee recognition by drawing attention to the ways in which the giving of recognition can convey information about the perceptions and intentions of the individuals involved in the process of recognition.

Signalling theories of gift giving also contribute to knowledge about employee recognition through drawing attention to the possibility for gifts to be unsuccessful in their communicative function and instead for recipients to interpret the gift negatively or in ways which run contrary to the intentions of the donor (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001). Interviewees' accounts explored in this chapter where employees have interpreted recognition in unusual and unintended ways (for example, as a parting gift to employees who are soon to lose their jobs) provide interesting illustrations of such misunderstandings and misinterpretations in the process of gift giving. In my discussion of these employee accounts, I have suggested how such misinterpretations may occur when, as a result of reduced levels of organisational trust, individuals are suspicious of the intended information conveyed through the giving of recognition awards. Indeed, this is a key finding of this research as it suggests the importance of trust between the parties involved in the process of recognition if recognition is to successfully fulfil its communicative function.

Furthermore, the application of psychological contract theory (Rousseau 1989, 2001) in my interpretations of Council X employees' recognition experiences in this chapter enhances the study of employee recognition by drawing attention to the implications of employee perceptions of fairness and transparency in the design, management and communication of employee recognition schemes. The concept of the psychological contract illustrates the mechanisms through which perceptions of procedural injustice can affect employees' perceptions of the scheme and the organisation, as well as their

behaviour towards the organisation. Moreover, a recent contribution to the psychological contract literature by Conway et al. (2014) suggests that employees' reactions towards perceived procedural injustice in employee recognition schemes may be moderated by factors such as job insecurity and public sector motivation, again emphasising the importance of context in understanding how employees experience and understand employee recognition.

The next and final chapter concludes my account of the research process and findings of this PhD study. I reflect on my research questions and how this thesis has contributed to knowledge about and theory on employee recognition. Finally, consideration is given to practical implications of the findings for organisations, before considering limitations of the thesis and concluding by identifying areas for future research.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1   Introduction

The central aim of this research was to contribute to the literature on employee recognition through the study of employees' experiences of recognition. There were three primary research questions guiding the research process:

- How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?
- What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?
- What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

This research arose from an identified need for more academic research examining employee recognition, in particular research which explores the lived experience of recognition from the perspective of those individuals who have given or received recognition in the workplace (see Chapter Two). Despite strong evidence that organisations are increasingly incorporating non-cash recognition into their reward management systems (Long and Shields 2010; Garr 2012; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD] 2013) and a significant body of practitioner literature advocating employee recognition (for example, Boyle 1995; Gostick and Elton 2009; Hale and Maehling 1992; Knouse 1995; La Motta 1995; Luthans 2000; McAdams 1991, 1995, 1999; Pardy 1999; Rose 2001, 2011), there is very little empirical research examining how employee recognition schemes actually work in organisations, particularly how they are implemented and managed, and the ways in which recognition affects employees and organisations. Furthermore, the relatively few studies on employee recognition which have been conducted have been based methodologically on quantitative analysis, identifying and assessing relationships between recognition and other variables, in particular the relationship between recognition and employee behaviour. Such approaches have led to the insider experiences and perspectives of employees being overlooked as a potential source of insight. Thus, by adopting a Social Constructionist approach to research which foregrounds the voices and perspectives of employees, this thesis offers an empirical contribution to the literature on employee recognition, enhancing understanding of the underlying dynamics of employee recognition as a human resource management practice.

This final chapter draws together the findings of my research conducted at two organisations, Insurer and Council X. I begin by briefly reflecting upon the research activities which made up my research process. Next, I review my research questions in light of the findings outlined in Chapters Five and Six, highlighting the major empirical and theoretical contributions made by this study. Finally, I consider the practical implications of the findings for human resource practitioners and organisations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the research limitations and possible future research projects which could further enhance our knowledge of employee recognition.

7.2 Overview of the research process

My research process started with an extensive review of the literature on employee recognition schemes, both academic and practitioner, in order to identify the main issues surrounding and gaps in knowledge about employee recognition (see Chapter Two). In order to address an identified lack of existing research exploring employee recognition from the perspective of the individuals involved, I decided that my research would focus on employees' experiences of recognition. The research's exploratory nature and focus on understanding the phenomenon of employee recognition by gaining access to the subjective interpretations and meanings given to recognition by employees led me to adopt a qualitative strategy of inquiry involving the use of in-depth interviews with employees across two organisations, Insurer and Council X. A comprehensive rationale for this research design is provided in Chapter Four.

The identification of an unexpected theme in the transcript of an early interview with an employee at Insurer caused me to consider how the giving and receiving of recognition may fulfil a social function in establishing reciprocal exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace. This possible social function of employee recognition is not accounted for within the current theoretical perspectives of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory which are typically invoked as the theoretical basis for employee recognition schemes. Therefore, I conducted a second literature review, this time of the anthropological, sociological and economic literature on gift giving (found in Chapter Three). This literature review generated a number of insights which I considered to be particularly valuable in

enhancing knowledge of the social functions and implications of employee recognition practices. Consequently, I decided to apply theories of gift giving in my interpretation of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences.

Consistent with the research's focus on uncovering the meanings individuals give to recognition in the workplace, I adopted an inductive, exploratory (thematic) approach to the analysis of the employees' accounts of their recognition experiences. Through this thematic analysis process, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees by identifying some of the tacit perceptions and beliefs which employees hold about recognition. This thesis illustrates how a range of factors including the organisational context, the scheme design, the way in which the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation and the way in which recognition is delivered to recipients mediate individuals' experiences of recognition.

Drawing upon theories of gift giving, I offer interpretations of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences which identify a number of important social functions fulfilled by employee recognition, namely the development and maintenance of social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace, the communication of information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition, and the promotion of a sense of solidarity and unity within the organisation (see Chapters Five and Six). I also highlight that, whilst employee recognition may fulfil several important social functions, it may have both positive and negative social implications in the workplace. I now turn to consider the empirical and theoretical contributions of these findings to our knowledge and understanding of employee recognition.

7.3   Review of the research questions and central contributions of the thesis

This thesis aimed to contribute to knowledge about employee recognition through the study of employees' experiences of recognition in the workplace. To evaluate the thesis' achievement of this aim, this section of the chapter will now examine each of the three research questions in turn, outlining the major empirical and theoretical contributions to knowledge.

7.3.1   How do individuals experience and understand employee recognition?

This research question was posed in response to an identified lack of existing literature which considers recognition schemes from the perspective of the individuals involved. Prior to conducting this study, there were significant gaps in our knowledge of employee recognition, particularly around the impact of recognition on individuals and the factors which might affect their experiences of recognition. These gaps had been left unaddressed by existing research on employee recognition (reviewed in Chapter Two) which has generally been based methodologically on quantitative analysis, identifying and assessing relationships between recognition and other variables, in particular the relationship between recognition and employee behaviour. Theoretically, this existing research has been based upon the assumption that the role of recognition in organisations can be measured in terms of its impact on aspects of employee behaviour such as productivity and attendance.

By contrast, this thesis is founded upon the belief that the concept of employee recognition can be understood only through understanding the meaning of the concept for those who experience it. Thus, this research adopts an insider perspective on employee recognition in an attempt to address the gaps in knowledge about employee recognition left unaddressed by quantitative researchers. This study expands knowledge of employee recognition by taking as its focus that which has previously been ignored by quantitative studies on employee recognition: the meanings and interpretations, motives and intentions, that are used by people in their everyday lives and which direct their actions.

In order to gain access to access to the tacit knowledge and subjective interpretations and meanings given to recognition by employees, a qualitative strategy of inquiry was adopted, using in-depth interviews with individuals drawn from two organisations, Insurer and Council X, about their recognition experiences. This methodological approach has contributed to the empirical and theoretical contributions of the thesis outlined in the following section and in Sections 7.3.2 and 7.3.3.

Through my thematic analysis of the employees' accounts, I have been able to draw out some of the perceptions and beliefs which employees hold about recognition, thus contributing to knowledge about how recognition schemes are experienced and understood by employees.

The first major contribution of this thesis to knowledge about employee recognition is showing that scheme design is an important factor in determining the ways in which individuals understand their recognition experiences and the value which recipients derive from their awards. At Insurer, the particular scheme design limited the role and influence of the nominating individual within the recognition experience, with the line managers being given the main responsibility for judging nominations and communicating recognition awards to successful recipients. This design feature was reflected in the way the interviewees tended to foreground the way the recognition was communicated or delivered to them (or not) by their line manager within their accounts of their recognition experiences, suggesting that the way schemes are designed can affect the significance given by the individual to particular elements of the recognition experience over others.

A second significant way in which this thesis contributes to knowledge about employee recognition is by revealing that individuals' experiences of recognition are strongly mediated how line managers informally operate elements of the recognition scheme, for example the delivery of recognition. Employees expressed a strong belief that recognition should be made personal to them as individuals and that the line manager should take the needs and preferences of the recipient into account when communicating the recognition award. Thus, there was a potential for the line managers' personal beliefs about how recognition should be delivered and their role in the recognition process to work in harmony with and even enhance the formal scheme. However, the employees' accounts also highlighted the potential for individuals' recognition experiences to be negatively affected in circumstances where line managers' personal beliefs about how recognition should be delivered, or the ways in which it may legitimately be used, are at odds with those of other parties involved in the recognition process, or the organisation's intentions for the scheme.

The importance of alignment between the recognition scheme design and individuals' personal beliefs about how recognition should be provided is a further key finding and contribution of this thesis to knowledge and understanding of employee recognition. This was particularly evident at Council X where employees expressed a shared belief that, for recognition to be effective and, crucially, believed to be sincere, it should communicate to the recipient what the donor values about the recipient 'personally'. However, elements of the design of The Excellence Awards were found to be in

conflict with this preference by employees for recognition to have a personal dimension. Although nominations can be made by both internal (Council employees) and external customers (members of the public), currently, the reasons these individuals give in support of these nominations are not automatically made available to nominated individuals. Instead, these nominations are only read by members of the judging panel which selects a winner and up to three other shortlisted finalists in each award category. The lack of information provided to recipients about the reasons why they had been chosen to receive an award contributed to their suspicion that their awards were not about them 'personally' but, rather, 'political' attempts by senior management to be seen by other Council employees and members of the public to be valuing and investing in certain services.

In light of their recent experiences of restructures, job losses and funding cuts in the public sector, some considered this perceived use of The Excellence Awards to get 'paper coverage' and cultivate a positive public image as an employer who values and invests in its employees as indicative of a "values-gap" between the Council's professed stance towards its employees and what it communicates about the degree to which it values employees through its relationships with and actions towards them. Indeed, the impact of the organisational changes currently taking place in the public sector loomed large in the accounts of all of the employees at Council X. Without exception, each employee interpreted the recognition awards they received and The Excellence Awards more broadly in light of the specific public sector context in which they operated, indicating that organisational context can strongly mediate individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace and potentially lead to them to interpreting recognition in ways unintended by the organisation. Therefore, the importance of the organisational context on how individuals experience and understand recognition is a further key finding and contribution of this thesis.

One of the interviewees, James, further emphasised the importance of a 'culture of suspicion' in understanding employee reactions to schemes such as The Excellence Awards, suggesting that shared cultural beliefs about the appropriate way to act and respond to certain situations may influence how employees experience and understand employee recognition. Indeed, a general sense of suspicion and mistrust towards the recognition scheme and the Council itself was evident in the accounts of many employees at Council X. This suspicion was further fuelled by employees' concerns

about the fairness and transparency of the procedures leading to the allocation of recognition awards, indicating that how recognition schemes are implemented and managed within the organisation is an additional factor mediating individuals' experiences of recognition. Furthermore, the organisational context in which The Excellence Awards scheme operates intensified individuals' feelings of procedural injustice, suggesting that within organisational contexts where levels of organisational trust may already be diminished as a result of organisational change, there is an even greater need to build greater clarity and transparency into the procedures which lead to the allocation of rewards.

The influence of the organisational context further accounts for the complex and often contradictory perceptions and attitudes expressed by Council X employees towards The Excellence Awards. Whilst employees' accounts expressed a general sense of mistrust towards The Excellence Awards scheme and the Council as a whole, the awards ceremony itself was perceived as having a positive social function in promoting solidarity between Council employees by providing an opportunity for individuals and teams who would perhaps not normally come into contact with one another to unite for one evening to celebrate what the Council had collectively achieved over the previous year. The event was also perceived by interviewees to generate a number of social benefits for attendees, including a greater sense of belonging within the organisation and opportunities to create, maintain and renew social connections with other individuals across the Council. Employees' positive perceptions of The Excellence Awards ceremony in contrast to their more cynical attitudes towards the recognition scheme itself may be explained by the ceremony's perceived function in further building the sense of solidarity between employees which has developed as a result of their shared experiences of organisational change.

With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that many employees who received individual awards at the ceremony expressed discomfort about being recognised for their personal achievements or contributions. For some, receiving external acknowledgement and recognition for their contributions conflicted with their public sector motivation and threatened their understanding of their own behaviour as entirely internally motivated. Other award recipients expressed their concerns about how their achievements might pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth and their own interpersonal relationships through attempting to re-define their individual

successes as collective achievements and demonstrating sympathy for individuals who they had outperformed.

Insights from the literature on social comparison suggest that, where the individual feels a strong sense of solidarity with their colleagues, public recognition may contribute to the individual's sense of discomfort as a result of perceiving themselves to be a target of a threatening upward comparison (Exline and Lobel 1999). In these situations, private recognition may be more favourable than public recognition. Thus, an additional contribution to knowledge and understanding of employee recognition offered by this thesis is the finding that the way in which recognition is delivered to recipients is a further significant factor moderating individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace.

Furthermore, the complexity evident in employees' accounts of their recognition experiences may be considered to stem from the way that The Excellence Awards simultaneously promotes a sense of solidarity between employees through its annual awards ceremony whilst also posing a threat to such solidarity by highlighting certain individuals' superior performance through public recognition. This again highlights the importance of alignment between recognition scheme design and individuals' personal and shared beliefs about how recognition should be provided, which are themselves formed within particular organisational contexts.

In summary:

To my knowledge, this is the first large qualitative study of employee recognition. Previous research on employee recognition has been largely based methodologically on quantitative analysis, identifying and assessing relationships between recognition and other variables, in particular the relationship between recognition and employee behaviour. Such approaches have led to the insider experiences and perspectives of employees being overlooked as a potential source of insight. Thus, this thesis advances existing literature on employee recognition by taking a different methodological approach to those usually applied to the study of employee recognition, providing in-depth interpretations of employees' experiences of recognition in the workplace.

Furthermore, this thesis makes a distinctive empirical contribution to the literature on employee recognition by identifying five main factors which mediate individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace:

1. The social and organisational context, including the organisational culture
2. The recognition scheme design
3. The way the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation, particularly by line managers
4. The way in which recognition is provided to recipients (for example, privately or publicly)
5. The level of alignment between the recognition scheme design and individuals' personal beliefs about recognition

The identification of these five factors which mediate individuals' experiences of recognition in the workplace advances the literature on employee recognition by addressing an identified need for research around how employee recognition schemes actually operate in organisations and the ways in which they impact on individuals (Brun and Dugas 2008). Furthermore, these five mediating factors provide insights into the characteristics of recognition which are most important to employees and how recognition should be provided (Bradler et al. 2013; Neckermann and Frey 2013).

Regarding which characteristics of recognition are most important, the findings of this research suggest that that the organisational context and the way schemes are designed can affect the significance given by the individual to particular elements of recognition and the recognition experience over others. At Council X, the organisational context led employees to pay more attention to the fairness and transparency of the processes leading to the allocation of awards, and attending the awards ceremony was generally valued more by employees than the awards themselves. At Insurer, the scheme design limited the role and influence of the nominating individual within the recognition experience, with the line managers being given the main responsibility for judging nominations and communicating recognition awards to successful recipients. This led to the way in which the recognition was presented (or not) by line managers becoming a major factor in determining whether the recognition experience was experienced positively or negatively.

In terms of how recognition should be provided, the findings strongly suggest that recognition should be given in a way which is meaningful for each individual recipient. There is no "one size fits all" approach to providing recognition; donors or line managers responsible for communicating awards nominated by peers should tailor their approach and method of delivery to the individual recipient, recognising that what works for one individual may not work for another. Clearly, this presupposes donors/line managers who have the ability and willingness to empathise with the recognition recipient in order to accurately predict their recognition preferences.

A related finding of this research is that, for recognition to be successful, it must communicate to the recipient what the donor values about them personally. Thus, particularly in situations where the recognition donor is the organisation (as is the case at Council X), recognition should be accompanied by specific feedback regarding why the individual has been chosen to receive an award. Recognition which is informational and communicates how the recipient has made a difference to the donor personally is more likely to be experienced by the recipient as genuine and therefore rewarding (Blau 1964), and may also increase perceived self-determined competence and enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985; Deci et al. 1999).

In organisational contexts where employees have a strong public service motivation, recognition schemes should be designed to facilitate the effective recognition of employees by members of the public. Recognition from service users was considered valuable by interviewees as it provides feedback about the impact of their work on the lives of the people in their communities and reinforces their feeling that they are engaged in meaningful work.

Furthermore, there are some circumstances in which private recognition may be favourable to publicly delivered recognition. For example, where there is a strong sense of solidarity between employees, as seen as Council X, there is an increased likelihood of award recipients experiencing feelings of discomfort when their superior performance is highlighted through a receiving a public recognition award. Recognition which is delivered privately to recipients may allow organisations to recognise high-performing individuals and teams whilst avoiding the interpersonal risks of outperformance.

The findings at Insurer further suggest that, if the recognition involves a non-cash gift, recipients value being able to select a recognition gift which appeals to them personally rather than being given something which has been chosen because it is assumed to be desirable to a large number of people (such as the bottle of wine or Marks and Spencers vouchers). From an economics perspective, this is also the most efficient gift giving solution since this avoids the inefficiencies created by the mismatch of gifts and recipient preferences (Waldfogel 1993).

7.3.2 What are the social functions and implications of recognition in the workplace?

This research question was developed in an attempt to expand knowledge about employee recognition by diverting attention away from how it affects individuals towards its social significance, what it does for groups of employees and the organisation as a whole. A related aim was to explore the possibility that there may be negative side-effects of recognition for individuals and the wider social group of employees and to identify the circumstances under which these might occur.

Drawing upon theories of gift giving in my interpretations of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences at both Insurer and Council X, I have identified three main social functions fulfilled by employee recognition: the communication of information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition, the development and maintenance of social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace, and the promotion of a sense of solidarity and unity within the organisation. Furthermore, whilst offering insights into its possible positive social functions and implications, this thesis contributes to knowledge about employee recognition by drawing attention to its possible dysfunctional consequences.

Firstly, the application of signalling theories of gift giving (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001) to the employees' accounts suggests that, beyond its use as a management tool to reinforce organisationally desirable behaviours, the giving and receiving of employee recognition has a communicative function to convey information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition.

At Insurer, employees' accounts indicate that the giving of recognition communicates to the recipient how the nominating individual's perceives the recipient and their

willingness to invest time and effort in their relationship. Furthermore, by accepting e-thank you cards or recognition awards and expressing pleasure and a sense of gratitude towards the donors, individuals can signal willingness to comply with the relationship dynamics established by the donor's act of recognition (Camerer 1988) and to accept the donor's perception of them as accurate (Schwartz 1967).

Extending signalling models of gift giving to incorporate the role of line managers at Insurer in communicating and presenting the award to recipients further highlights the communicative function of employee recognition by illustrating how, through delivering/presenting the recognition in a way which is meaningful to the recipient, the line manager can signal how well they identify with the recipient as an individual and can accurately predict their recognition preferences. This information may have social utility functions by helping to develop and sustain significant relationships between individuals based on mutual identification and empathy and conversely in "screening out" relationships where there is limited potential for mutual identification and empathy between the two parties (Camerer 1988; Fennell 2002).

The findings of my interviews with employees at Council X similarly support signalling interpretations of gift giving by illustrating how the Council is perceived by employees to be using The Excellence Awards scheme as a way of communicating to other members of the Council and members of the public the Council's positive regard for and willingness to invest in certain individuals and services.

The role of employee recognition in communicating information is also apparent in the accounts of Council X employees who emphasise the importance of recognition from service users. Recognition from members of the public is particularly valued by employees as it conveys information about the service user's perceptions of them, provides feedback about the impact of their work on the lives of the people in their communities and reinforces their feeling that they are engaged in meaningful work. By communicating how the recipient has made a difference to the donor personally, the recognition is more likely to be believed by the recipient to be genuine and, therefore, to be experienced as rewarding (Blau 1964), and may also increase perceived self-determined competence and enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985; Deci et al. 1999).

Secondly, insights from social exchange theory (Blau 1964) have been used to draw out the social function of employee recognition to help develop and maintain social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace.

At Insurer, the accounts of employees suggest that the giving and receiving of recognition is governed by a social exchange framework, whereby reciprocity may be direct (between two individuals) or generalised to the wider social unit or work group. The employees' accounts suggested that the giving of recognition to individuals who have provided benefits to them is driven a desire to maintain balance in their social relationships with others, as well as the expectation of future return (Blau 1964). The operation of a shared norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) serves both to compel individuals to reciprocate benefits they have received and instil confidence that benefits they give will be returned in the future, providing a plausible explanation for the generally high level of engagement of employees with the scheme. Indeed, employees described the perceived benefits of gift giving for the donor, such as the recipient's gratitude and the establishment and maintenance of a social relationship which may be beneficial to the donor in the future either through access to support or additional resources.

At Council X, it is the annual The Excellence Awards ceremony which helps to develop and maintain social connections between individuals, whilst also fulfilling an additional social role to promote unity and solidarity within the Council. Employees considered the event to provide an opportunity for individuals and teams who would perhaps not normally come into contact with one another to unite for one evening to celebrate what the Council had collectively achieved over the previous year. In particular, the seating configuration which placed individuals from different areas and levels of the organisation together at the same table was identified as a key way in which the organisation created a sense of all employees being 'in this together', whilst facilitating informal networking between members of the Council from all areas and at all levels, as well as external stakeholders.

Indeed, in providing the means and motivation for individuals to create, maintain and renew social connections with colleagues, both the recognition schemes at Insurer and Council X may have further positive social implications. As Baker and Dutton argue, 'by affecting people's perceptions of each other, attracting them to each other and

instilling expectations of mutual regard', employee recognition may motivate individuals to engage in generalised reciprocity, thus creating a network of interdependent social relationships which can provide access to information, resources, support and influence (2007: 330). Such social capital benefits not just the individual members of the network but the organisation which employs these individuals, through their enhanced capabilities to search for and access resources and information which can be used to achieve organisational objectives.

This thesis further contributes to knowledge about employee recognition by highlighting potential negative social implications of employee recognition. At Council X, although the interviewees' accounts indicated that the interviewees derived a number of social benefits from receiving recognition, many who received individual awards discomfort about being recognised for their personal achievements or contributions. The employees' accounts reveal that individuals may experience discomfort, embarrassment or guilt as a result of receiving recognition when they perceive such external acknowledgement and recognition of their contributions to conflict with their public sector motivation, or that their achievements may pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their interpersonal relationships. At Council X, individuals expressed their discomfort by expressing feelings of guilt and sympathy for those who they had outperformed (i.e. those individuals who had not received recognition awards). However, the literature on social comparison suggests that there is a risk that individuals may reduce their own effort to reduce others' perceived status inadequacies (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004; White et al. 2002) which may disrupt the effective and efficient operation of the organisation.

Interestingly, employees at Insurer did not express any feelings of discomfort as a result of receiving an e-thank you card or recognition award. There are two possible reasons which may explain these different reactions of Insurer employees and Council X employees to receiving individual recognition. Firstly, at Council X, employees demonstrated a heightened sense of solidarity with other Council employees in response to their shared experiences of organisational change. Therefore, as noted above, recognition such as the kind provided through The Excellence Awards which communicates the individual's superior performance to the entire Council may conflict with their sense of solidarity with other employees in a way which it does not

at Insurer due to lower levels of solidarity between individuals as a result of Insurer's relatively stable organisation context.

A second possibility is that the public delivery of recognition at Council X increases individuals' susceptibility to sensitivity about being the target of a threatening upward comparison since it highlights the individuals' superior performance to others. Whilst at Insurer, line managers may choose to deliver recognition awards publicly in front of the team, the employees' accounts suggested that generally recognition is delivered more privately, either one-on-one or by email, thus minimising individuals' concerns that their achievement may pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their interpersonal relationships.

In summary:

Prior to this study, researchers have tended to focus on the impact of recognition on individual behaviour, whilst little was known about its possible social functions or wider implications.

Through applying insights from the gift giving literature, and the methodological approach taken in this research, this thesis makes an original empirical and theoretical contribution to the literature on employee recognition by identifying three previously un-researched social functions of employee recognition. These are:

1. To convey information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition
2. To develop and maintain social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace
3. To promote unity and solidarity within the organisation.

Thus, this thesis extends the existing literature on employee recognition by drawing attention to its functions within the workplace beyond a management tool to reinforce organisationally desirable behaviours.

Furthermore, this thesis makes an empirical contribution by offering insights into both positive social implications and dysfunctional consequences of employee recognition.

A positive social implication of employee recognition suggested by the findings at both organisations was the creation of social connections between individuals which

may be used to access information, resources, support and influence. This finding is consistent with research by Baker and Dutton (2007) which identifies employee recognition as an enabler of social capital. Thus, this thesis contributes to a growing body of research in organisational studies where researchers have applied the concept of social capital in the explanation of how interpersonal relationships may deliver benefits both for the individuals and organisations which invest in them (see Adler and Kwon 2002 for a review).

However, this thesis also draws attention to the potential dysfunctional consequences of employee recognition in situations where individuals perceive such external acknowledgement and recognition of their contributions to conflict with their intrinsic motivation to perform their job, or are concerned that their achievements may pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their interpersonal relationships. This research found that, in such situations, employees may experience feelings of discomfort, including embarrassment and guilt, and respond through attempting to re-define their individual successes as collective achievements and/or demonstrating sympathy for individuals who they have outperformed. Furthermore, the findings highlight the influence of organisational culture on individuals' susceptibility to such outperformance distress, with individuals who feel a high level of solidarity with other employees being more likely to experience feelings of discomfort when their superior performance is highlighted through a receiving a public recognition award.

In providing illustrations of the possible dysfunctional consequences of employee recognition for individuals and groups and suggesting possible conditions under which these consequence might occur, this thesis contributes to a small but growing body of research which has found negative side effects of employee recognition (Carusetta 2001; Deci 1971; Deci et al. 1999; Exline et al. 2004; Feys et al. 2013; Gubler et al. 2013; Henagan 2010; Lepper et al. 1973; Johnson and Dickinson 2010; Kohn 1993; Mackenzie 2007; Warren and Plumb 1999).

7.3.3 What can theories of gift giving offer to the study of employee recognition?

The question originally arose in response to the inability of needs-based motivation theory and reinforcement theory, which are typically invoked as the theoretical basis for employee recognition, to account for its possible social functions and implications. Thus, I aimed to identify insights from the literature on gift giving reviewed in Chapter

Three which might contribute to knowledge and understanding of the social functions and implications of employee recognition, distinct from its use as a management tool for reinforcing desired employee behaviours.

In this thesis, I drew upon insights from signalling models of gift giving (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001) and social exchange theory (Blau 1964) as an interpretive approach to the in-depth exploration of employees' accounts of their recognition experiences.

As described in the previous section, my interpretations of the accounts of employees at both Insurer and Council X provide support for signalling theories of gift giving, indicating that employee recognition may have a social function to convey information about the perceptions and intentions of individuals involved in the process of recognition. However, beyond illuminating the communicative function of employee recognition, signalling theories of gift giving also offer insights into the reasons why sometimes recognition is successful and at other times recipients interpret recognition negatively or in ways which run contrary to the intentions of the donor.

The recognition experience described by William (Insurer) in Chapter Five illustrates how gifts can be used to signal how much the donor knows about the recipient's preferences (Camerer 1988; Prendergast and Stole 2001). By choosing to deliver a recognition award discreetly to a member of his team who William knew would find public recognition uncomfortable, William conveyed to the recipient both that his work was appreciated and that he was recognised as an individual by William. Indeed, Fennell (2002) calls this special form of communication brought about through gift giving "empathetic dialogue". It involves a donor putting themselves in the place of the recipient to determine what the recipient would most want to receive from this particular donor and the recipient envisaging the donor's empathetic efforts in selecting the gift (Cheal 1988, cited in Fennell 2002). Thus, the recognition experience described by William may be judged successful by Fennell as it involved both William and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other: William seeking to predict the type of recognition which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the thought William put into his choice of how to present the recognition. This special "empathetic" form of communication facilitated through the giving and receiving of recognition is considered to strengthen

and maintain the relationship between William and the recipient through the fulfilment of individuals' desires to identify with another and to have one's true preferences understood by them (Fennell 2002).

By contrast, the failed acts of recognition described by employees such as Bob (Insurer) and Sandra (Council X) result from the donors' lack of identification with the recipients of the recognition. In the case of Bob, it is the failure of the manager to 'personally' speak to him which means that he is left feeling 'cold' about the recognition he received. For Bob, the manager's decision to allow Bob's award to be communicated to him through the automatically generated email conveys the manager's lack of identification with Bob's recognition preferences and him as an individual. For Sandra, the failure of the Council to provide her with information regarding what was valued about her 'personally' leads her to suspect that her award was 'political' and therefore to mistrust the information signalled through the giving of the award.

Together these examples illustrate that, in order for recognition to be successful, it must communicate to the recipient that the donor recognises them personally as an individual. This insight is reminiscent of what Brun and Dugas term the personal or 'existential' recognition approach to recognition which involves recognition of 'the person as a dignified, equal, free, and unique being who has needs' (2008: 727). Thus, in highlighting the importance of a personal dimension for successful recognition, the findings of this research support Brun and Dugas' assertion that this existential approach should serve as a foundation for all other recognition practices.

However, this thesis has further illustrated that organisational context and culture, as well as a lack of organisational trust may also contribute to employees interpreting recognition in unintended ways. At Council X, many employees believed that the Council had an 'ulterior motive' for The Excellence Awards scheme and for selecting them as an award recipient as a result of a 'culture of suspicion' which determines the appropriate way to respond to new initiatives in the public sector. Thus, whilst the award may have been intended by the Council to convey its positive perceptions of the recipient, this shared sense of suspicion towards the Council caused some employees to mistrust the information signalled through the award and instead to interpret the award in alternative and unusual ways. For some, the awards were a

'political' attempt by senior management to communicate to other Council employees and members of the public their investment in certain public services. For others, their fears about employment security as a result of recent restructures and funding cuts caused them to pessimistically interpret their awards as signalling their imminent loss of employment ('a well done and goodbye kind of thing'). This suggests that, if recognition is to succeed in signalling the information intended by the donor to the recipient, there must be trust between the two parties. It follows therefore that, in organisational contexts where levels of organisational trust are low, there is an increased possibility that recognition may be interpreted in ways contrary to the intentions of the donor.

Further insights into the possible negative reactions of employees to receiving recognition awards have been gained through the application of social exchange theory (Blau 1964) in this thesis. At Insurer, employee accounts indicated that some managers were using the financial value of recognition awards in order to incentivise employees to do things which they might not otherwise have been inclined to do, such as attending a marketing event outside of the normal working day. In doing so, managers are treating recognition as if it was a commodity which can be bartered away, affronting employees' understanding of recognition as a form of gift which creates a relationship between the individuals involved in its exchange. The employees' accounts support the central assumption of Blau's social exchange model that social interaction is motivated by self-interest by indicating that recognition is perceived as generating unspecified obligations in recipients. However, in social exchange, individuals are left to independently decide how and how soon they should discharge their obligations (Gouldner 1960). As Blau notes, social bonds are strengthened 'by remaining obligated to others as well as by trusting them to discharge their obligations for considerable periods' (1964: 99). Thus, by specifying the terms of the exchange in advance and demanding an immediate reciprocation for the recognition, the manager signals their lack of trust in the employee and desire to engage in a purely economic, as distinct from social, relationship with them.

Therefore, this thesis highlights the importance of trust for employee recognition to successfully fulfil two of its social functions: to convey meaning about the perceptions and intentions of the individuals involved, and to create and maintain social relationships between individuals. In order for recognition to successfully signal the

information intended by the donor, there must be a degree of trust between the two parties. Without trust, there is a strong possibility that the recipient will interpret the recognition in a way unintended by the donor. Similarly, social exchange relationships also require this crucial element of trust. Both parties must trust that the other will reciprocate for benefits received over time, and the meeting of obligations builds trust which, in turn, facilitates the ongoing exchange of benefits (Coyle-Shaprio and Parzefall 2008).

Finally, in applying psychological contract theory (Rousseau 1989, 2001) in my interpretations of Council X employees' recognition experiences, this thesis has drawn attention to how employee perceptions of fairness and transparency in the design, management and communication of employee recognition schemes can affect employees' responses to the scheme and their perceptions of and trust in the organisation. It has further illustrated how employees' reactions towards perceived procedural injustice in employee recognition schemes may be moderated by factors such as job insecurity and public sector motivation, consistent with recent research by Conway et al. (2014).

In summary:

This thesis makes an original empirical and theoretical contribution to knowledge about employee recognition by offering signalling and social exchange models of gift giving as theoretical perspectives in order to illuminate the social functions of recognition in communicating information about the perceptions and intentions of the individuals involved in the process of recognition, and in developing and maintaining social exchange relationships between individuals in the workplace.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to knowledge about the communicative function of employee recognition by providing insights into how successful acts of recognition operate and, conversely, the reasons why sometimes acts of recognition fail.

Successful acts of recognition communicate to the recipient that the donor recognises them as an individual, rather than purely for their organisational function. They involve both the donor and the recipient imaginatively putting themselves in the position of the other, the donor seeking to accurately predict the type of recognition which the recipient would like to receive from them, and the recipient envisaging the

amount of effort and thought the donor put into delivering the recognition in a way that is meaningful to the recipient.

However, acts of recognition are unsuccessful if the donor is unable or unwilling to identify with the recipient as an individual and accurately predict how they would like to be recognised and/or if the recipient is unable to empathise with the donor in making their choices about how to deliver the recognition. As a result, the recognition fails to persuade the recipient that the donor recognises them personally as an individual. The findings of this thesis further emphasise the importance of trust for recognition to successfully signal the information intended by the donor. Where levels of organisational trust are low, there is a strong possibility that the recipient will interpret the recognition in a way unintended by the donor.

7.4 Practical implications of the research

This thesis illustrates how a range of factors including the organisational context, the scheme design, the way in which the scheme is implemented and managed within the organisation and the way in which recognition is delivered to recipients mediate individuals' experiences of recognition. It also highlights that, whilst employee may fulfil several important social functions, it may have both positive and negative social implications in the workplace.

These findings have several important practical implications for HR practitioners and organisations who are considering or in the process of implementing an employee recognition scheme in the future. Beyond those already discussed in Section 7.3.1, the following section summarises the ways in which the findings of this research may guide practical design and implementation efforts.

Firstly, there is no "one size fits all" approach to employee recognition. Practitioners responsible for designing employee recognition schemes should tailor each scheme to the needs and circumstances of the individual organisation, including its culture and external environment. However, valuable lessons can be learned from the experiences of the two organisations discussed in this thesis about those elements of scheme design and ways of implementing recognition schemes which are successful (and those which are not) which may, in turn, inform and guide practical design and implementation efforts.

In organisations where levels of trust towards the organisation are already diminished as a result of organisational change, there is an increased need to build greater clarity and transparency into the procedures which lead to the allocation of rewards. Such considerations are of central importance as employee perceptions of the fairness or unfairness of human resource management practices are closely related to organisational trust (Carnevale and Weschler 1992).

It is important that the scheme design works in synergy with employees' personal beliefs about how and by whom recognition should be provided. Practitioners need to consult with employees through employee voice channels and incorporate the findings into their plans for the scheme. Public sector organisations should respond to the unique public service ethos of its employees by designing practices and strategies which more easily allow for employees to be appreciated by service users (Wittmer 1991). Increased involvement from service users may also have the added benefit of avoiding the perception of bias in award allocation decisions and increasing employees' perceptions of the overall fairness of the scheme.

This research suggests that recognition events (such as The Excellence Awards ceremony) may have a social function in promoting a sense of unity and solidarity between colleagues. Organisations where employees have developed a heightened sense of solidarity in the face of organisational change (as seen at Council X) may consider staging events such as company picnics, for example, which recognise the contribution of large groups of employees or even the whole organisation at once, rather than singling out particular individuals or teams. Again, the aim is to design recognition schemes so that they are in alignment, rather than conflict, with employees' personal beliefs about recognition and the broader organisational culture/ethos.

Whilst HR practitioners typically design employee recognition schemes, most rely on line manager involvement and support, therefore employees' responses to such schemes are liable to be influenced by the manager's own attitudes and approach to recognition and the quality of the relationship between the line manager and employees. The findings of this research point to the importance of the line manager's approach to the delivery of employee recognition in communicating information to the recipient about the line manager's perception of them, their intentions for their

relationship and how well the line manager understands them as an individual and their recognition preferences which may, in turn, influence their attitudes and responses towards the manager and the organisation. As a result, it is important that the right people with the right set of interpersonal and leadership skills are recruited into these crucial line management roles and that they are given access to the appropriate training and resources to support them in delivering recognition which is meaningful for each individual. This is of central importance because the quality of the relationship between the line manager and employees contributes to employees' perceived organisational support and consequently influences employees' levels of organisational commitment and attitudes towards the organisation (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007).

Finally, practitioners should be aware that employees may not respond to employee recognition schemes in the ways which are expected and intended by the organisation. Individuals may experience discomfort, embarrassment or guilt as a result of receiving recognition if they perceive that their achievements pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their interpersonal relationships, expressing this "outperformance distress" through a range of different emotional and behavioural responses (Exline and Lobel 1999; Exline et al. 2004) which may disrupt the effective and efficient operation of the organisation. This suggests that there may be circumstances in which private recognition may be favourable to public recognition. For example, where there is a strong sense of solidarity between employees, there is an increased likelihood of award recipients experiencing feelings of discomfort when their superior performance is highlighted through a receiving a public recognition award. Recognition which is delivered privately to recipients may allow organisations to recognise high-performing individuals and teams whilst avoiding the interpersonal risks of outperformance.

7.5   Reflexivity and limitations of the thesis

As is the case of all studies employing a qualitative strategy of inquiry, this thesis may attract criticisms from scholars working within the Positivist tradition regarding its replicability and generalisability beyond the confines of the particular contexts in which the research was conducted. An important criterion for the evaluation of quantitative research, replicability refers to the ability of other researchers to replicate the research and reproduce its findings. The process of replication is considered

important by quantitative researchers because it provides a way of checking that the research findings were unaffected by the original researcher's subjective biases, thus upholding the claim of the natural sciences to provide a definitive picture of the world (Bryman and Bell 2007).

However, the Interpretivist-Constructionist approach taken to this research holds that qualitative research by its very nature cannot be replicated because the real world is continually being constructed and reconstructed by and for its inhabitants (Marshall and Rossman 2003). From a Constructionist perspective, all social phenomena are context-specific, thus the interpretative insights presented in this thesis can only be my account (construction) of the accounts of my research participants which are themselves co-constructed within the specific interactional context of the research interview. Indeed, the accounts which the interviewees in this study gave of their recognition experiences are just one of many possible accounts which they may have given to myself or another researcher in another context at another point in time.

Nevertheless, in Chapter Four and throughout this thesis, I have endeavoured to make clear the rationale behind each decision I have made to enable the reader to evaluate the methods and procedures that I followed and how I constructed my interpretations of the data. My aim in doing so is not to make any claims about the generalisability of the findings to other organisations beyond those described in this thesis, but instead to allow the readers of the research to decide whether the findings might also apply to other contexts. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, the responsibility for demonstrating that a set of findings applies to another context lies with the researcher who wishes to make this transfer, rather than with the original researcher. Thus, the criteria of generalisability employed in quantitative research takes on a different meaning in qualitative research where it is 'the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization' (Bryman and Bell 2007: 424).

A further related concern which may be raised in relation to this study is how my subjectivity as a researcher (my particular perspectives, interests and experiences) shape the process and outcomes of research (Bryman and Bell 2007; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Maxwell 2005). Critics claim that the findings of qualitative research rely too heavily on what the qualitative researcher sees as important and question the

use of methods which encourage close personal contact with participants. Quantitative researchers argue that research should strive to be objective and value-free and regard the methods employed by qualitative researchers as a threat to this ideal (Churton 2000).

However, Constructionist researchers dismiss the Positivist goal of scientific neutrality in research as a 'myth', with researcher bias and subjectivity being considered an unavoidable and necessary part of doing qualitative research (Fontana and Frey 2005: 696). As Symon, Cassell and Dickson state:

> Social constructionists believe that reality is a social construction. From this perspective, as researchers and practitioners, we can only gather different accounts of reality. These accounts can therefore only be presented through our own interpretation, so we are in effect creating another account. We cannot therefore be 'objective', and, instead, should be reflexively aware of our own subjectivity.

> (2000: 460, cited in Cassell 2005: 170).

Thus, rather than attempt to avoid or eliminate my subjectivity, I have made it a key part of the process of conducting this research by engaging in self-reflexivity in order to analyse how subjective and intersubjective elements have affected the research outcomes. I have discussed my influence on each stage of the research process at various points in this thesis. For example, I have discussed my personal background, professional experiences and interests in Chapter One and, in Chapter Four, I have illustrated how I have engaged this process of reflection throughout the data collection and analysis phases. In order to acknowledge and highlight the interpretative and active role I have played in the analysis of the data (and indeed at all stages of the research process) I have continued to use the personal pronoun when presenting the findings of the research in Chapters Five and Six. Furthermore, I have included the thematic maps which I have constructed during my analysis of the data at the start of each of these two findings chapters as a reminder to the reader that the process of coding and deciding on themes is an inherently interpretative act.

Through my self-reflexive analysis, I have demonstrated my awareness that, in making decisions about which aspects of the interviewees' accounts to give attention and which to ignore, I have influenced the findings of this research. At the same time, I

cannot claim to know everything which influences my knowledge construction processes (Doucet and Mauthner 2008), thus I recognise that any self-reflexive analysis 'can only ever be a partial, tentative, provisional account' (Finlay 2002: 542). Thus, the account of the research process and findings presented in this thesis is just one of many 'different and potentially competing stories' which could have been told (Rhodes and Brown 2005: 178).

7.6 Future research directions

Although there are many directions which future research on employee recognition could take, three stand out as potentially fruitful.

Firstly, there is a clear need for further research examining the possible negative or dysfunctional consequences of recognition in the workplace. Drawing upon literature on social comparison, the present research has suggested that receiving recognition may cause individuals to experience discomfort due to concerns about how their achievements might pose a threat to others' self-esteem and self-worth, and their own interpersonal relationships. In this present research, the heightened sense of solidarity which has developed between employees at Council X as a result of significant organisational change is considered to increase individuals' susceptibility to sensitivity about being the target of a threatening upwards comparison (Exline and Lobel 1999). Further research is needed to test this proposition as well as to investigate the influence of additional situational, personal and interpersonal factors on individuals' emotional reactions to receiving recognition. Additional factors worthy of consideration identified by Exline and Lobel (1999) include gender (where women are assumed to be more prone to outperformance distress than men), competitive environments (with competitive reward structures where rewards are scarce being expected to intensify outperformance distress) and the quality of the relationship between the outperforming and outperformed individuals (where outperformance concerns are likely to be more intense in close rather than distant relationships).

Secondly, the findings of this research suggest that, in helping to establish connections between colleagues, and thus creating a network of interdependent social relationships which can provide access to information, resources, support and influence, employee recognition may provide the conditions for the creation of social capital (Baker and Dutton 2007). Given the potential benefits of social capital for both individuals and

organisations, the suggestion that employee recognition could foster its creation through motivating individuals to engage in generalised reciprocity is certainly worthy of additional research. However, before employee recognition is advocated by practitioners as an enabler of social capital (Baker and Dutton 2007), further research needs first to establish exactly how this works in practice. In this current research, individuals emphasised the importance of a perceived lack of instrumentality in the giving of recognition. This suggests that there may be negative social consequences where individuals are perceived to be consciously using employee recognition to cultivate social networks which they can exploit for their own benefit. Thus, future research should be alert to the possibility that the use of employee recognition in this way may have both benefits and costs for individuals and organisations.

A third issue, not within the scope of this current research, concerns the ways in which employee recognition interacts with cash-based forms of reward. This is a question which virtually no empirical research has addressed. One notable exception is a study by Long and Shields (2010) which found that non-cash recognition schemes are widely used by Western organisations to recognise both individuals and groups of employees but, contrary to the suggestion of some non-cash recognition advocates (e.g. Bob Nelson), they do not substitute for cash-based reward. However, in my research at Insurer, I discovered that the financial value of recognition awards may be being used by managers to compensate individuals after an unfavourable pay review or as a flexible way of incentivising employees in order to achieve managerial goals. This suggests that, whilst organisations may have both non-cash and cash-based schemes in place, in practice, employee recognition may be being used as a substitute for cash-based forms of reward which are insufficient or not readily available to managers. Since this managerial practice was perceived negatively by employees at Insurer, thus potentially limiting the effectiveness of the employee recognition scheme, research is needed to investigate the possible factors driving managers to use the scheme in this way.

7.7   Conclusion

This chapter concludes my account of the research process and findings of this PhD study. In it, I have reflected upon my research questions and how these have made empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on employee recognition. I have outlined the practical implications of the findings for organisations considering or in the process of implementing an employee recognition scheme. Consideration was given to some of the possible limitations of the thesis, and the chapter concluded by identifying a number of future research projects which take forward the insights generated through this thesis.

As I approach the end of my research journey and reflect upon what I now know about recognition, its important social functions, but also its potential dysfunctional consequences and implications, I am struck by the extent to which my knowledge and understanding of employee recognition has evolved since the early days of this project. Back then, my own strongly positive experiences as a recipient of recognition made me highly receptive to the work of practitioner-consultants and recognition advocates, Jerry McAdams, Bob Nelson and Michael Rose, and an eager recruit to their ranks. Looking back, I now recognise that, in choosing to focus this research on employees' experiences of recognition, I was, more or less unconsciously, seeking confirmation of what I thought I knew already about the motivational benefits of receiving recognition.

Now, and as a direct result of the process of conducting this PhD research, I realise that organisations and individuals are not as homogenous and predictable as the practitioner literature on employee recognition might lead us to believe, and there is certainly no "one size fits all" approach to recognition which works for everybody and in every social and organisational context. Whilst most of us like to receive recognition, the ways in which we like to receive that recognition and from whom we like to receive it varies from individual to individual and perhaps even from day to day depending on how we are feeling or the situation in which we find ourselves. For example, now that I am no longer eighteen and working part-time in a shoe shop, would I still enjoy being singled out for recognition by my manager in front of my colleagues? Perhaps not. Context appears to be everything when it comes to recognition. Thus, whilst I am grateful for those early experiences of recognition

which were the starting point for this study, I come away from this PhD experience not only with a more developed understanding of the variety of ways, both positive and negative, in which recognition may impact upon individuals and organisations but a deeper awareness of the importance of context in shaping the outcomes of employee recognition schemes.

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