

THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE PERSPECTIVE: A Critical Assessment

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Researchers who employ the organizational culture perspective tend to differ on their philosophical and theoretical positions. This paper examines the organizational culture perspective by identifying and analyzing the different philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the various forms of cultural research. Based upon this examination, the author concludes that within the organizational culture perspective, most of the researchers employing the dominant approach (i.e., "research on culture") suffer from some theoretical as well as ethical problems. It is argued that a more subjective approach (i.e., "cultural analysis of organizational life") will enable researchers to overcome some of these problems and thus is a more promising one.

Introduction

It has become popular among academicians and practitioners to discuss organizations in cultural terms. Concepts such as organizational culture, corporate culture, organizational symbolism and the related terms such as myth, legend, story, ritual, ceremony, etc., can be readily found to be featured in most management journals. In the managerial world, books advocating the cultural perspective of management have become popular. For example, Deal and Kennedy's *Corporate Culture*¹ and Peters and Waterman's *In Search*

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of Excellence,² once ranked among the nation's best sellers. In the academic world, the concept of organizational culture has also received much attention, and the *Administrative Science Quarterly* even published a special issue focusing on this topic.³ *The Journal of Management* also devoted a whole issue to the discussion of organizational symbolism which is closely related to the concept of culture.⁴ Moreover, many conferences have been organized to explore the subject of organizational culture and have generated volumes of conference proceedings,⁵ which are frequently cited as significant by students in the fields of education, communication, organizational behavior, and organization theory.

For all of its current popularity, "organizational culture remains a phenomenon that is as yet neither fully understood nor agreed upon."⁶ Sypher et al. observe that "the cultural approach" has become a catch-all phrase glossing a variety of organizational culture studies with very little resemblance

¹ Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

² Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, *In search of Excellence* (New York: Warner Books, 1982).

³ *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28(3) (September 1983).

⁴ *Journal of Management*, 14(2) (1985).

⁵ Peter J. Frost, Larry F. Moore, Meryl R. Louis, Craig C. Lundberg, and Joanne Martin, ed., *Organizational Culture* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1985); Louis R. Pondy, Peter J. Frost, Gareth Morgan, and Thomas C. Dandridge, ed., *Organizational Symbolism* (Greenwich, Conn.: Jai Press Inc., 1983).

⁶ Craig C. Lundberg, "On the Feasibility of Cultural Intervention in Organizations," ed. Frost et al., *Organizational Culture* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1985), pp. 169-170.

other than the use of similar terms.⁷ Thus, organizational culture might mean different things to different people. For some, organizational culture is to be treated as a variable which can be managed to affect other variables such as commitment or productivity.⁸ For others, it should be conceptualized as a root metaphor which directs the organizational researchers' attention to the "culture-like" aspects of organizational life, adding to the dominant metaphors of machine and organism,⁹ and bringing forth a new way of understanding organizational life.¹⁰

These different conceptualizations of organizational culture (i.e., variable vs. root metaphor) can be seen as reflecting the different concerns and purposes among the students of organizational culture. To fully understand these different conceptualizations, one first has to examine closely these different purposes and concerns. One should begin with the "mainstream" perspective, that is, culture as a variable.

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- ⁷ Beverly D. Sypher, James L. Applegate, and Howard Sypher, "Culture and Communication in Organizational Contexts," ed. William Gudykunst, Lea Stewart, and Stella Toomy, *Communications, Culture, and Organizational Process* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1985), p. 14.
- ⁸ Noel Tichy, "Managing Change Strategically: The Technical, Political and Cultural Keys," *Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1982): 59-80; Howard Schwartz and Stanley Davis, "Matching Corporate Culture and Business Strategy," *Organizational Dynamics* (Summer 1981): 30-48; Alan L. Wilkins and William G. Ouchi "Efficient Culture: Exploring the Relationship between Culture and Organizational Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28 (3) (September 1983): 468-481.
- ⁹ Mariann Jelinek, Linda Smircich, and Pual Hirsch, "Introduction: A Code of Many Colors," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28(3) (September 1983): 331-338; Gareth Morgan, *The Images of Organization* (Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage Publications, 1986).
- ¹⁰ Linda Smircich, "Is the Concept of Culture a Paradigm for Understanding Organizations and Ourselves?" ed. Frost et al., *Organizational Culture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), pp. 55-72.

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The Dominant Perspective: A Critical Examination

The major concern of those who conceptualize organizational culture as a variable is this: how can organizational theorists and managers promote the management and the change of organizational culture to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and employee commitment? Here, the main concern is individual and organizational performance. Kilmann et al. make it clear that

there is not much point in attempting to study or change a thing called culture if it does not affect what goes on in organizations. An important assumption guiding all of our discussions on this topic, therefore, is that culture does affect organizational behavior and performance.¹¹

Kilmann et al.'s position is shared by many practitioners and academicians of organization. Tichy, for example, argues that corporate culture can and should be molded and shaped through the use of "role modeling, jargon, myths, and rituals, as well as the use of the human resource systems of selection, development, assessment, and rewards."¹² Peters and Waterman pro-

¹¹ Ralph H. Kilmann, Mary J. Saxton, and Roy Serpa, "Introduction: Five Issues in Understanding and Changing Culture," ed. Ralph Kilmann, Mary Saxton, Roy Serpa and Associates, *Gaining Control of the Corporate Culture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), p. 3.

¹² Noel M. Tichy, "Corporate Culture as a Strategic Variable," presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, New York, p. 3., quoted in Lundberg, "On the Feasibility of Intervention," p. 172.

pose “seven easy steps” to manage organizational culture.¹³ Allen offers a four-phase systematic program as a clear guideline for changing cultures.¹⁴ Kilmann further presents a five-step participatory process to change the corporate culture through the assessment and change of cultural norms.¹⁵

These authors can be categorized as “cultural pragmatists,”¹⁶ according to Martin:

Cultural pragmatists generally see culture as a key to commitment, productivity, and profitability. They argue that culture can be — indeed, should be and has been — managed, and they often offer guidance as to how to do this. Their prescriptions for this admittedly difficult task range from the active (seven steps to managing cultural change) to the relatively passive (culture as relatively unmalleable, a potential obstacle to desired strategic change that must be anticipated and “worked around”). From this perspective, it is arrogant or ignorant to question whether culture can be managed.¹⁷

It should be noted that there are many authors who recognize that cul-

¹³ Peters and Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*.

¹⁴ Robert F. Allen, “Four Phases for Bring About Cultural Change,” ed. Kilmann et al., *Gaining Control of the Corporate Culture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), pp. 332-350.

¹⁵ Ralph Kilmann, “Five Steps for Closing Cultural Gaps, ed. Ralph Kilmann et al., *Gaining Control of Corporate Culture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), pp. 351-369.

¹⁶ Joanne Martin, “Can Organizational Culture Be Managed?” ed. Frost et al., *Organizational Culture* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1985), pp.95-98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

tural change is not as “programmable” as cultural pragmatists have suggested¹⁸ and argue that managers should only try to **facilitate** cultural change instead of attempting to **impose** “desired” forms of culture.¹⁹ However, as long as these authors conceptualize organizational culture as a variable to be manipulated to achieve organizational effectiveness, their fundamental positions are not much different from those of the cultural pragmatists; for their central concern is still about the management and change of culture; only their positions are more moderate than those who offer the ready-to-use prescriptions for managing culture.²⁰

As mentioned before, the cultural pragmatists’ prescriptions for culture management have been selling well in the business world. The rapid receptivity to the idea of cultural management can be seen as fostered by the managerial elite’s anxiety about the shift of economic power in the world. Since the late seventies, many American industries have been losing their competitiveness to foreign competitors, particularly Japan. The loss of econo-

¹⁸ W. Dyer, “Tracking Cultural Evolution in Organizations: An Historical Approach,” Working Paper, MIT, Sloan School of Management, p.2, quoted in Lundberg, “On the Feasibility,” p.173.

¹⁹ Dennis K. Mumby, *Communication and Power in Organization: Discourse, Ideology and Domination* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1988), p.8.

²⁰ For a discussion on the issue of the management of culture, see a collection of articles headed under the title “Can Organizational Culture be Managed?” in *Organizational Culture* ed. Frost et al., (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1985), pp.95-196.

mic advantage has raised some doubts among American managers about their capacities to **control** organizational activities by using existing managerial tools. Some new tools must be developed to improve organizational performance. Therefore, when the cultural pragmatists propose organizational culture as a new leverage which might be used to harness the "passion for excellence," these new prescriptions are often quickly accepted. In other words, organizational culture is conceptualized as a critical variable which can be and should be manipulated to regain a competitive edge.

Based upon such discussion, one may argue that works concerned with the management of organizational culture are guided by the "technical cognitive interest" which, according to Habermas' theory of knowledge, is concerned with the control of physical as well as social environment.²¹ Also, it can be pointed out that the prescriptions offered by these works are rooted in instrumental rationality which is concerned with how to achieve a pre-given end with the most efficient means.²² In this case, the end is productivity and the means is the management of culture.

Being preoccupied with the technical cognitive interest and instrumental rationality, the authors advocating on culture management make themselves vulnerable to several counts of criticism. The first charge is that the business of culture management is manipulative in its nature. It is argued that by taking instrumental rationality as their predominant mode of reasoning, authors

²¹ Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

²² Ibid.

on culture management tend to accept the organizational goals and purposes set by the management as **pre-given**. In this situation, the bottom-line concern of the management of culture, by logic, is the facilitation of the attainment of better production results, higher sales figures and higher profitability. The business of cultural change then becomes a game in which employees are manipulated, in a very subtle way, to achieve higher productivity. This game can be characterized as follows: the management of culture → a “strong” culture → employees’ pride in and love of the company → higher productivity.

One can also argue that as long as the “desirability” of a culture is evaluated with respect to the management’s goals, the culture management is, in effect, a tool of control. Unfortunately, many authors seem to be unaware or not critical of this managementcentric orientation in their works. Take Kilmann et al.’s position as an example:

A culture has positive impact on an organization when it points behavior in the right direction, is widely shared among the members of work group, and puts strong pressure on group members to follow the established cultural guidelines. Alternatively, a culture has negative impact on an organization when it points behavior in wrong direction, is widely shared among group members, and exerts strong pressures on group members.²³

One might want to ask: what is meant by right direction or wrong direction? And **whose definition** is to be employed in making this kind of evaluation? Although these authors do not address these questions explicitly, one

²³ Kilmann, Saxton, and Serpa, “Introduction,” p. 5.

could argue that what they have in mind is that the formal organizational goals (which, of course, are defined by the management) should be the standards for such evaluation. By adopting such a promanagement position, advocates of culture management become the theorists or engineers of a new model of control—the control of employee's psychic energy by manipulating the symbolic aspects of organizational life.

The present author's position here is that **not** all attempts to change organizational culture need necessarily be considered manipulative in nature. It is possible to bring cultural change that is free of manipulation if it is pursued through a process whereby organizational members are provided with "valid and useful information," and they are encouraged to reflect seriously upon such important cultural elements as the taken-for-granted assumptions, the out-of-awareness metaphors, the underlying values and the implicit cultural rules to determine whether they are still appropriate. After these assessments, they must be given "free choice" in exploring possible alternatives and in designing their future course of action. Thus, the whole process of change is built upon the organizational members' definitions of the organizational situations and thus can generate "internal commitment." By following these principles (i.e., valid and useful information, free choice, and internal commitment), a cultural change effort can be free of manipulation. ²⁴ If mana-

²⁴ For a discussion on the roles of "valid and useful information," "free choice," and "internal commitment" in organizational change, see Chris Argyris, *Intervention Theory and Method* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1973).

gement of culture is used, however, as a subtle means to direct the psychic energy of the members to attain the predetermined goals set by the organizational elites, then this approach must obviously be open to criticism and the possible charge of outright manipulation.

In addition to the issues of manipulation, many authors on culture management have been criticized as being too simplistic in their formulation of the concept of organizational culture. In order to make their projects easier to handle, they tend to reduce the concept of culture to basic values,²⁵ normative system,²⁶ norms,²⁷ and management philosophy.²⁸ Managers are advised to cultivate actively "positive" values, norms, and philosophy, and to manage and train employees to believe in them.

This problem of oversimplification has been identified by authors such as Schein,²⁹ Ott,³⁰ Sathe,³¹ and Pedersen and Sorensen.³² These authors have tried to develop a more complete model of organizational culture and have taken a more sophisticated stance toward the business of culture mana-

²⁵ Peters and Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*.

²⁶ Allen, "Four Phases for Bringing About Cultural Change." pp. 332-350.

²⁷ Kilmann, "Five Steps for Closing Cultural Gaps." pp. 351-369.

²⁸ Edwin Baker, "Managing Organizational Culture," *Management Review* (July 1980): 8-13.

²⁹ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco Ca.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986).

³⁰ J. Steven Ott, *The Organizational Culture Perspective* (Chicago, Illi: The Dorsey Press, 1989).

³¹ Vijay Sathe, *Culture and Related Corporate Realities* (Homewood, Illi: Richard Irwin Inc., 1985).

³² Jesper S. Pedersen and Jesper S. Sorensen, *Organizational Cultures in Theory and Practice* (Brookfield, Vt: Gower Publishing Company, 1989).

gement. Schein, for instance, reminds managers not to oversimplify and not to confuse culture with other concepts such as “values,” “corporate philosophy,” and “climate.” He also advises managers not to assume that there is a “positive” or “correct” culture and not to assume that culture can be easily manipulated like other things under the control of the management.³³

However, there is something inherently paradoxical in the more complete model of culture developed by these authors. That is, the more complex the model becomes, the less useful the managers will find it to be. This paradox, i.e., analytical sophistication vs. practical usefulness, is clearly pointed out in the following review of Schein’s *Organizational Culture and Leadership*:

There are several ways, however, in which practitioners are likely to be frustrated by this book. For example, perhaps the most practical insight from Schein comes from his healthy respect for the complexity of culture. Schein, more than anyone who has written to an audience that includes executives, has been willing to criticize the more general and unthoughtful claims about the relationship between culture and performance. While his exposition of how culture forms is something abstract, he provides some important insights about the kinds of problems anyone would face in intentionally trying to build or change culture. Any executive or consultant who read and understood Schein’s examples and arguments would probably be less confident about being able to take on the culture and come out the winner on the average.³⁴

³³ Schein, *Organizational Culture*.

The paradox of analytical sophistication vs. practical usefulness can be perceived as rooted in the positivistic mode of social inquiry which underlies the works of culture management.³⁵ According to the positivist epistemology of professional practice, professional activity consists of the rigorous application of scientific theory and technique to the concrete problems in the practice situation. According to this view, the development of general theories and principles that can be applied to service-related problems are of vital importance to the effective practice in the profession. Moore's statement represents this position well:

If every professional problem were in all respects unique, solutions would be at best accidental, and therefore have nothing to do with expert knowledge. What we are suggesting, on the contrary, is that there are sufficient uniformities in problems and in devices for solving them to qualify the solvers as professionals professionals apply very general principles, standardized knowledge, to concrete problems.³⁶

This model of knowledge generation and application has appeared to

³⁴ Alan L. Wilkins, "Book Review — Organizational Culture and Leadership: A Dynamic View," *Human Resource Management* 24(3) (Fall 1985): 370-375.

³⁵ For a concise discussion of the positivistic mode of social inquiry, please see Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, (Pennsylvania: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982), pp. 1-54.

³⁶ Wilbert Moore, *The Professions* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), p.56, quoted in Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), p. 24.

be very successful in some professions such as medicine and engineering. However, in other "minor professions"³⁷ such as management, the existence of a scientific knowledge which can be applied uniformly to everyday problems is still lacking. According to the positivist mode of theory and practice, in order to advance a "minor profession" to full professional status, researchers must be able to develop valid theories which specify the **causal relationships** between various variables so that practitioners will be able to rely on these general theories to **explain** the causes of their problems and to **predict** the results of their actions in their daily professional practice. Only by doing this can the practice of the profession become the rigorous application of scientific knowledge instead of having to rely on the trial-and-error use of rules of thumb.

However, there is a paradox in this model of theory and practice. That is, as the theorists try to incorporate more and more variables into their theories to make them capable of producing more complete explanations and more precise predictions, the practitioners, at the same time, find that these theories then become less and less useful in application. The irony is that when a theory takes only a few variables into consideration, it appears too simplistic to the practitioners who are faced with a complex, uncertain, and unstable practice situation; however, when a theory attempts to incorporate enough relevant variables to free itself from being disparaged for being out of touch with reality, it often becomes so complicated that it appears to be too overwhelming for the practitioners to take seriously in their day-to-day

³⁷ Nathan Glazer, "Schools of the Minor Professions, *Minerva* (1974).

actions.

In summary, authors on culture management can be criticized, to various degree, for being managementcentric in orientation, manipulative in motive, and paradoxical in application. These problems have resulted from the more fundamental philosophical positions underlying these authors' conceptualization of culture. Their predominant concern about instrumental rationality makes them blind to their managementcentric position. The technical cognitive interest leads them to emphasize the importance of gaining control through manipulation or "cultural engineering." And finally, the positivistic mode of social inquiry can be said to contribute to the analytic — practical paradox. To solve these problems, a different conceptualization based upon different philosophical and theoretical underpinnings is necessary. The rest of this paper will be devoted to the discussion of this issue.

The Cultural Analysis of Organizational Life: A More Promising Approach

In contrast to the cultural pragmatists' conceptualization of organizational culture as a variable which can be and should be manipulated to increase efficiency, effectiveness and worker commitment, the position of the "cultural purists"³⁸ is that it is naive to speak of managing culture.

Cultural purists, on the other hand, find it ridiculous to talk of managing

³⁸ Martin, "Can Culture Be Managed?" p. 95.

culture. Culture cannot be managed; it emerges. Leaders don't create cultures; members of the culture do. Culture is an expression of people's deepest needs, a means of endowing their experiences with meaning. Even if culture in this sense could be managed, it shouldn't be, particularly if it were being managed in the name of increased productivity or the almighty dollar. From this perspective, it is naive and perhaps unethical to speak of managing culture.³⁹

According to the cultural purists' conceptualization, organizational culture is not a variable; instead, it is treated as a root metaphor for the understanding of organizational reality.⁴⁰ Researchers taking this perspective hold the notion that organizational reality is a social construction which is continually created, sustained and recreated by organizational members' ongoing interaction.⁴¹ Thus, the central concern of researchers from this perspective is to address the question, "What is it that allows organizational members to engage in behavior that can be consensually identified as 'meaningful' or 'appropriate'?"⁴² Here, the focus is on the ways in which organizational culture helps members make sense of their organizational experience.⁴³

This mode of research is termed by Smircich as "cultural analysis of or-

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Linda Smircich, "Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28(3) (September 1983): 339-358.

⁴¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).

⁴² Mumby, *Communication and Power*, p. 9.

⁴³ Sypher, Applegate, and Sypher, "Culture and Communication," p. 17.

ganizational life," while the mode of research discussed in the previous section is termed "research on culture."⁴⁴ Based upon Smircich's analysis of these two modes of research,⁴⁵ one can identify three important points of difference between them:

- While "research on culture" adopts top management's values, purposes and language, "cultural analysis of organizational life" studies whose definition is being taken.
- In "research on culture," culture is treated as a critical variable in pursuing organizational productivity; in "cultural analysis of organizational life," culture is viewed as a metaphor for understanding meanings in organizational life.
- Unlike "research on culture," "cultural analysis of organizational life" is not concerned with achieving control and predictability; instead, it studies how events, activities and interaction become meaningful.

Based upon the above contrasts, one can point out that the guiding cognitive interests of these two camps of research are different. While "research on culture" is guided by **technical cognitive interest**, "cultural analysis of organizational life" is guided by **practical cognitive interest** which is concerned with understanding the process in which the ends and the rules of thought and action are created and sustained.⁴⁶ Therefore, instead of taking

⁴⁴ Smircich, "Is Culture a Paradigm?"

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Michael M. Harman and Richard T. Mayer, *Organization Theory for Public Administration* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), p. 322.

ends and rules as pre-given, researchers doing cultural analysis of organizational life consider the existing organizational ends and rules as problematic, and thus can avoid the problem of managementcentricism.

Also, the practical cognitive interest guides the researchers to focus their attention on the communicative process in which organizational members create subjective and intersubjective interpretation of organizational life. By seeing organizational members as social actors who actively create, modify, and change meaning in their work life, it is hard for the researcher to treat them as merely some instrument to be manipulated to achieve the pre-defined organizational goals. Thus, one can argue that by taking the "cultural analysis of organizational life" perspective, research can be free from the problem of manipulation which is evident in most works done in the "research on culture" perspective.

Conclusion

The above critical examination of the organizational culture perspective shows that within this perspective, while some researchers are generating new insights for understanding organizations, most of the researchers employing the dominant approach (i.e., "research on culture") suffer from some theoretical as well as ethical problems. An alternative approach (i.e., "cultural analysis of organizational life") will enable researchers to overcome some of these problems and thus is a more promising approachone.

組織文化觀點之探討與評估

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組織文化的觀點，近年來在組織研究的領域內受到相當廣泛的重視。然而儘管許多研究者都以組織文化為其研究之中心概念，但事實上，這些研究者彼此之間卻往往在哲學立場及理論基礎上有極大的差異。本文之目的即在於對組織文化觀點內的這些不同哲學立場與理論基礎加以分析、檢視。文內所探討的主要問題包括：什麼是組織文化？為什麼組織文化觀點會受到研究人員與管理人員的歡迎及重視：當前組織文化的研究有什麼特點？這些研究有什麼長處及缺失？透過對這些問題之探討，本文指出：在採用組織文化觀點的研究中，雖有部份研究者發展出對了解組織極有助益的新見解，但大部份採用“主流途徑”(亦即將文化視為組織變數之一而加以研究之途徑)的研究者都遭遇到一些理論及倫理上的問題與困難。本文主張：採用組織文化觀點的研究者如選用另一研究途徑(亦即將組織視同文化而對組織生活進行文化分析)以取代前述的“主流途徑”，則可避免或克服上述之問題與困難。