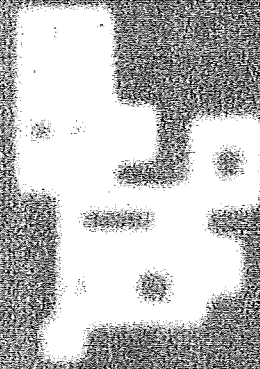


Oxford



Organization Theory

Modern
Symbolic
and
Postmodern
Perspectives

Mary Jo Hatch

7 Organizational Culture

IN many ways, the culture of an organization is borrowed from and bound up with larger cultural processes associated with the organization's environment. Every organization expresses aspects of the national, regional, industrial, occupational, and professional cultures in and through which it operates.¹ Each organization is formed, in part, through cultural processes established by a variety of environmental actors. However, the most immediate source of outside influence on the organizational culture is found *within* the organization—its employees.

Before joining an organization, employees have already been influenced by multiple cultural institutions such as family, community, nation, state, church, educational systems, and other work organizations, and these associations shape their attitudes, behavior, and identity. Employees bring these influences with them when they join an organization. Because of this, it is difficult to separate an organizational culture from the larger cultural processes that we labelled the cultural sector in our discussion of the general environment in Chapter 3.

Even though it is difficult to distinguish an organization's culture from larger cultural processes, organization theorists believe that it is necessary to try to do so. Experience with only a few different organizations shows why this is so. Think of the contrast between Apple Computer's anti-establishment employees devoted to rule-breaking innovation and IBM's white-shirted professionals committed to customer service. If you only pay attention to larger cultural forces and do not consider culture at the level of the organization, you will miss much of what makes these two companies seem distinctive. Nonetheless, most of the following discussion about what culture is applies equally well across levels of analysis including nation, society, organization, and organizational subculture. What makes a study of culture (or anything else) *organizational* is your focus of interest which defines your level of analysis, as was explained in Chapter 2.

This generality may cause you some initial discomfort, partly because I will

often use examples drawn from the societal level. I do this because societal-level examples are familiar enough to most people to render them understandable, whereas organizational examples demand familiarity with the everyday life of specific organizations that most people do not have. It is important, however, that you apply these concepts to organizations with which you are familiar. The examples I will offer are designed to inspire this application to your own experience.

Beyond the levels of analysis issue, you will face another challenge in coming to grips with the organizational culture concept. This challenge arises from the symbolic-interpretive roots of the culture concept as it is used in organization theory. In the early 1980s several books on corporate culture appeared on best-seller lists in the United States. Among them the most widely known are William Ouchi's *Theory Z*, Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy's *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, and Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*. The enormous attention these books generated was no doubt linked to concern at that time to explain Japanese competitiveness in American markets, but it also offered an opportunity to symbolic-interpretive organization theorists who were frustrated by modernist theories and methods and wanted to strike out in new directions. These researchers were the first organization theorists to jump on the corporate culture bandwagon and they made liberal use of over 100 years of theory and research in cultural anthropology and folklore studies to inspire and legitimize their efforts. The result was importation of the symbolic-interpretive perspective as a new approach to organization theory.

Thus, unlike theorizing about social structure, technology, environment, and strategy, the conceptualization of organizational culture was influenced from the beginning by the symbolic-interpretive perspective. In the study of organizational culture, it is more often modernist perspectives that challenge symbolic-interpretive ideas rather than the other way around. Because of this reversal in the fortunes of symbolic-interpretivism, the study of organizational culture has a different feel. One of the most important differences that you will notice has to do with the subjectivist epistemology adopted by symbolic-interpretivists compared to the objectivist epistemology of the modernist perspective. As was explained in Chapter 2, using an objectivist approach means that you view the phenomenon of interest from the outside, as natural scientists attempt to do when they adopt the role of independent observer. The subjectivist approach of symbolic-interpretivists involves discovering how insiders experience and construct their world which involves grappling with their meanings and interpretations, rather than imposing the researcher's meanings and interpretations upon them. This is what anthropologists refer to as the native view, and understanding it requires empathy, which is encouraged by a subjectivist epistemology.

This chapter begins with the question: What is organizational culture? Following discussion of the ways in which culture has been defined, we will explore national influences on organizational culture via Dutch culture researcher Geert Hofstede's model of the national cultural differences he found in the international subsidiaries of IBM. Next we will examine American social psychologist Edgar Schein's theory of organizational culture which served as a departure point for many of the organizational theorists who have contributed to this field of study. Symbols and interpretation, two fundamental ideas defining the symbolic-interpretive approach, will then be examined in relation to the organizational culture concept, and ethnography, the favored method of symbolic-interpretive cultural researchers, will be described and illustrated. Two typologies of organizational subcultures and a postmodern perspective on organizational culture will be presented next. The chapter concludes with examination of some of the ways in which modernists have addressed the culture concept, with particular attention given to their concerns about whether or not culture can be managed.

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

Organizational culture is probably the most difficult of all organizational concepts to define. The same has been said about defining culture at the societal level.² As British sociologist and cultural critic Raymond Williams explains, culture originally referred to the tending of crops and animals. Its meaning was extended beyond the physical domain by the metaphoric identity of crops and animals with the human mind and soul. According to the culture metaphor, society tends humans via the family, the community, educational institutions, and religious practices, just as farmers tend their crops and animals via plowing, pruning, feeding, herding. Close association between culture and social progress, civilization and aesthetic achievement (i.e., music, painting, sculpture, literature, poetry, and philosophy) added a sense of superiority and elitism to culture's meaning. This elitism is reflected, for example, in distinctions such as primitive versus advanced cultures and high versus popular (pop) culture.

According to British sociologist Chris Jenks, early efforts to define culture are associated with the formation of the academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Both of these fields were born with emerging interest in applying the techniques of science to the study of humans. Often located in the same academic departments in their universities, sociologists and anthropologists worried a great deal over whose territory was whose and eventually worked out an

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agreement that sociology would study all phenomena having to do with human society, and anthropology would explain the origins and cultural development of the human species. However, the close association between the interests and physical location of sociologists and anthropologists (their offices were frequently situated along the same hallway) shows up time and again as overlap in their key ideas and it is often difficult to separate their contributions to the study of culture.

The culture concept was originally proposed as one way to answer the question: What makes us human? Early on, anthropologists were primarily concerned with explaining the differences between humans and other animals and to differentiate culture and nature (in order to provide a foundation for the human sciences that was distinguishable from that of the natural sciences on which they were modelled). Thus the notion of culture was at first a very general one, having to do with characteristics that all humans held in common. For instance, British social anthropologist E. B. Tylor defined culture as: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."³ The focus on culture meant concern with symbolic representations (e.g., language) through which humans distinguished themselves from say ants or dolphins.

As anthropologists extended the idea of evolution to the concept of culture, they reasoned that if humans develop along some sort of evolutionary continuum, as other animal species seem to do, then culture is a possible explanation for the distinctiveness of human development. From this line of reasoning emerged the idea that different cultural groups or societies could be ordered according to their stage of development, from primitive on one end, to modern on the other. For researchers interested in the cultural development of humankind, one place to look for evidence was to primitive cultures who were believed to be living as advanced cultures must have done earlier in their own developmental cycles. So anthropologists went in search of culture's origins by living in primitive cultures for extended periods and documenting the various aspects of their members' lives. However, as their studies accumulated, the idea that primitive societies were socially and culturally backward became difficult to sustain. It gradually became more and more obvious that so-called primitive cultures were in some ways more sophisticated than the so-called advanced cultures from which the anthropologists had come, and that the so-called advanced cultures were barbaric in certain respects when compared to what had previously been described as primitive.

The ethnocentrism of the basic premise of cultural research became a source of great criticism directed at the field of cultural anthropology which was then accused of having conspired with colonialist governments to the great

disadvantage (and in some cases the disappearance) of tribal societies. The change in attitude has refocused culture theory. Anthropologists still believe that cultures change, but not in a way that gives any of them the right to claim cultural superiority. In fact postmodern anthropologists now argue that the idea of superiority itself is embedded in cultural meaning systems and to study culture requires acknowledging preconceived notions derived from your own cultural background when approaching the study of another person's culture.

So, in the early days of anthropology, interest in culture meant an interest in understanding what is distinctively human, what separates humans from the other animals and thus what defines our similarity. As researchers pursued this interest out into the field, culture became associated with particular groups of people (e.g., primitive tribes, modern societies), and comparisons between these groups took place. This association between groups and cultures (rather than culture) caused anthropologists to talk about groups as if they were cultures and shifted the focus of anthropology from the general understanding of humankind as a species, to the distinctive characteristics of particular groups, and thus to human differences. This shift can be seen by comparing Tylor's 1871 definition of culture given above, with the definition offered in 1948 by American cultural anthropologist Melville Herskovitz: "a construct describing the total body of belief, behavior, knowledge, sanctions, values, and goals that make up the way of life of a people."⁴ This shift of culture onto groups opens the door to the study of organization culture because, since organizations are by definition groups, the culture metaphor can be applied to organizations.

Although, for some (especially postmodernist) organization theorists, culture retains its association with the intellectual and artistic, most organization theorists have emphasized the meaning of culture as a particular way of life among a people or community. Thus, organizational culture usually refers to the way of life in an organization. A sample of the definitions that have been offered by organization theorists is provided in Table 7.1. Notice that all but one of these definitions explicitly associates the concept of culture with groups, and that they all refer to something held in common or shared among group members: meanings, assumptions, understanding, norms, values, knowledge.

The definitions in Table 7.1 should reveal to you how central the notion of sharing has been in the development of the organizational culture concept. However, when researchers go looking for these shared meanings, understanding, values, and so on, they do not find them. What they find instead are some key symbols that are widely recognized by organizational members, but which are associated with a multitude of meanings and interpretations. This puzzle is solved when you examine the concept of sharing closely. There you will discover that sharing has two contrary meanings.⁵ The meaning most of us immediately

TABLE 7.1. SELECTED DEFINITIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Elliott Jaques (1952: 251) "The culture of the factory is its customary and traditional way of thinking and doing of things, which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all its members, and which new members must learn, and at least partially accept, in order to be accepted into service in the firm."

Andrew Pettigrew (1979: 574) "Culture is a system of publicly and collectively accepted meanings operating for a given group at a given time. This system of terms, forms, categories, and images interprets a people's own situation to themselves."

Meryl Reis Louis (1983: 39) "Organizations [are] culture-bearing milieux, that is, [they are] distinctive social units possessed of a set of common understandings for organizing action (e.g., what we're doing together in this particular group, appropriate ways of doing in and among members of the group) and languages and other symbolic vehicles for expressing common understandings."

Caren Stehl and Joanne Martin (1984: 227) "... organizational culture can be thought of as the glue that holds an organization together through a sharing of patterns of meaning. The culture focuses on the values, beliefs, and expectations that members come to share."

Edgar Schein (1985: 6) "The pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have 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 these problems."

John van Maanen (1988: 3) "Culture refers to the knowledge members of a given group are thought to more or less share; knowledge of the sort that is said to inform, embed, shape, and account for the routine and not-so-routine activities of the members of the culture. ... A culture is expressed (or constituted) only through the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. ... Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation."

Harrison Trice and Janice Beyer (1993: 2) "Cultures are collective phenomena that embody people's responses to the uncertainties and chaos that are inevitable in human experience. These responses fall into two major categories. The first is the *substance* of a culture—shared, emotionally charged belief systems that we call ideologies. The second is *cultural forms*—observable entities, including actions, through which members of a culture express, affirm, and communicate the substance of their culture to one another."

think of has to do with common experience; when we share, we are directly involved with others in a way that emphasizes our similarity. This has been the meaning most often linked to the culture concept in organization theory. But sharing also means that we divide something into individual pieces (shares) and distribute them among ourselves, as in sharecropping. This second meaning emphasizes our separateness.

Take the example of sharing a meal with friends. We join in a communal activity when we share a meal, but, at the same time, we each eat our own separate portions of food. You might say that sharing means doing something separately together. It is a communal act accomplished by splitting something up. Just as sharing a meal does not mean that we all eat exactly the same food, sharing cultural patterns does not imply that all members have the same cultural experiences and understandings. Sharing culture means that each member participates in and contributes to the broad patterns of culture, but the contributions and experiences of individual members of the culture are not identical.

When speaking of culture as shared meaning, understanding, values, belief systems, or knowledge, keep in mind that a culture depends upon both community and diversity. It allows for similarity, but also supports and relies upon difference. As our discussion moves from theories that present culture as a unity in the first half of the chapter, to theories that focus on subcultures, and then on cultural fragmentation, notice that the idea of sharing shifts from the similarity pole (Schein's model) to the pole of differences that lie within cultures (the subculture and fragmentation views).⁶ Notice how the same shift that refocused anthropology from culture in general to the culture of groups has been repeated in the shift within organizational culture studies from culture as an organizational unity, to culture as a means of explaining differences between various subgroups of the organization.

NATIONAL CULTURE DIFFERENCES WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

The most unified understanding of organizational culture comes from the idea that organizations are manifestations of larger cultural systems. In the late 1970s Geert Hofstede examined this idea in relation to the influence of national cultures on IBM, a large multinational corporation based in the U.S., and, at the time of the study, operating in over 40 countries. Hofstede analyzed survey data concerning work-related values. He made comparisons across the international affiliates of IBM and found evidence of national cultural differences within IBM's organizational culture. In analyzing the data, Hofstede found that differences in the attitudes expressed by managers of IBM's international subsidiaries could be explained using four dimensions which he labelled: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity (see Figures 7.1 and 7.2).

Power distance refers to the extent to which the members of a nation are will-

ing to accept an unequal distribution of power, wealth, and prestige. Low power distance characterizes countries, like Denmark, where such inequalities are difficult to accept. For instance, the Danish *Jante Law* (pronounced *yenta*) proclaims that no individual should have more than, or stand out in any noticeable way from, other Danes. When Danes try to put themselves forward as more prestigious or powerful than others, they are quickly reprimanded by peers who remind them of the inherent equality of all Danes and thus reinforce the value for low power distance in Danish society. Another example is the exceptionally high income tax paid by the Danes which is an indicator of their unwillingness to accept an unequal distribution of wealth. Many organizations rely heavily on an unequal distribution of authority which forms a hierarchy. When such organizations attempt to impose their authority structures on subsidiaries in low power distance cultures like Denmark, difficulties generally follow.

Uncertainty avoidance involves the ways in which human societies have learned to cope with uncertainty. For instance, technology is often used to defend against uncertainties caused by nature (e.g., reinforced building structures in earthquake prone areas), while law helps us to defend against uncertainties produced by the behavior of others (e.g. laws against thievery, brutality, fraud). Religion, on the other hand, is a cultural means to help us accept uncertainties that we cannot defend against. Hofstede argues that different societies have different levels of tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and unfamiliar risks, and that these differences can be defined as the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures, people are more accepting of innovative ideas and eccentric or deviant behavior, whereas in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, these are resisted. Hofstede finds that uncertainty avoidance is high in Greece, Portugal, and Japan, while it is low in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Sweden.

Individualism involves the degree to which individuals in a culture are expected to act independently of other members of the society. You will find evidence of individualism, which Hofstede opposes to collectivism, in the ways in which people live together (e.g., in nuclear families, tribes, or in shifting partnerships or alone). Hofstede points out that, in some cultures, such as the U.S., individualism is seen as a source of well-being, whereas in others like Chinese or Mexican cultures, it is seen as undesirable and alienating. Relationships between members of individualistic cultures are loose and individuals are expected to take care of themselves. By contrast, in collectivist cultures, cohesive groups give individuals their sense of identity and belonging, demanding considerable loyalty in return for the sense of security that they impart.

Masculinity refers to the clear separation of gender roles in society. In highly masculine cultures, men are expected to be more assertive and women more

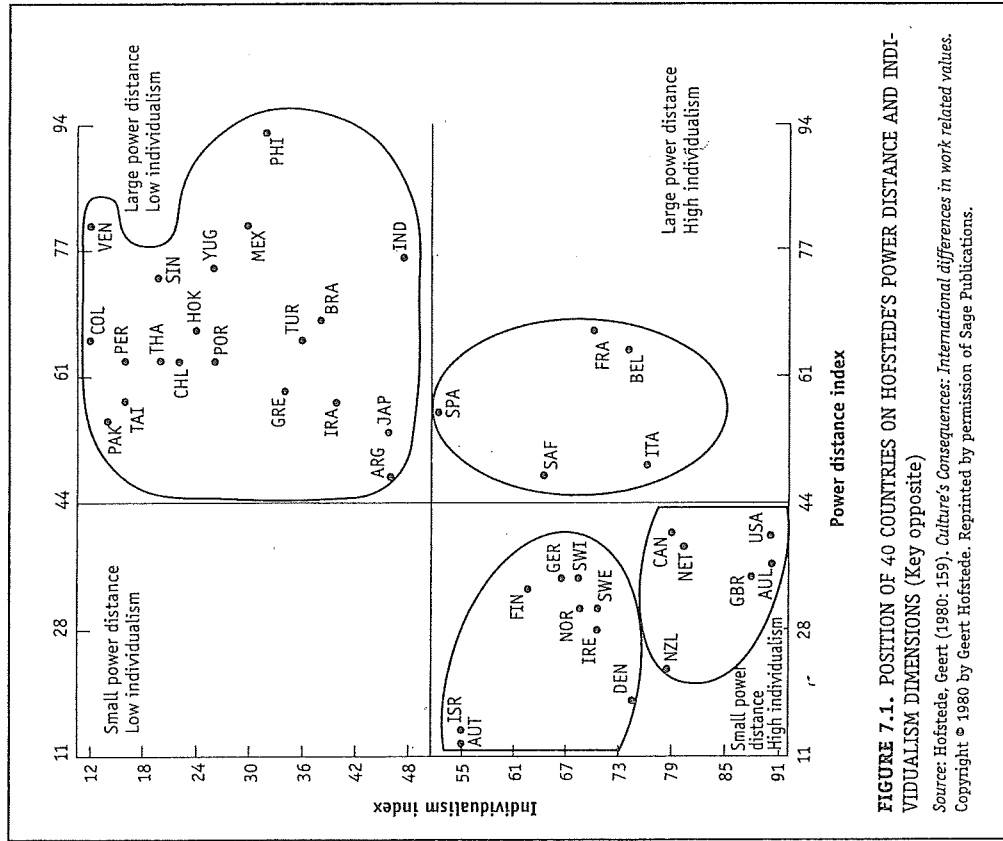


FIGURE 7.1. POSITION OF 40 COUNTRIES ON HOFSTEDE'S POWER DISTANCE AND INDIVIDUALISM DIMENSIONS (Key opposite)

Source: Hofstede, Geert (1980: 159). *Culture's Consequences: International differences in work related values*. Copyright © 1980 by Geert Hofstede. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications.

KEY	ARG	Chile	GER	Germany
	AUL	Colombia	GRE	Greece
	AYT	Denmark	HOK	Hong Kong
	BEL	Finland	IND	India
	BRA	France	IRA	Iran
	CAN	Great Britain	IRE	Ireland

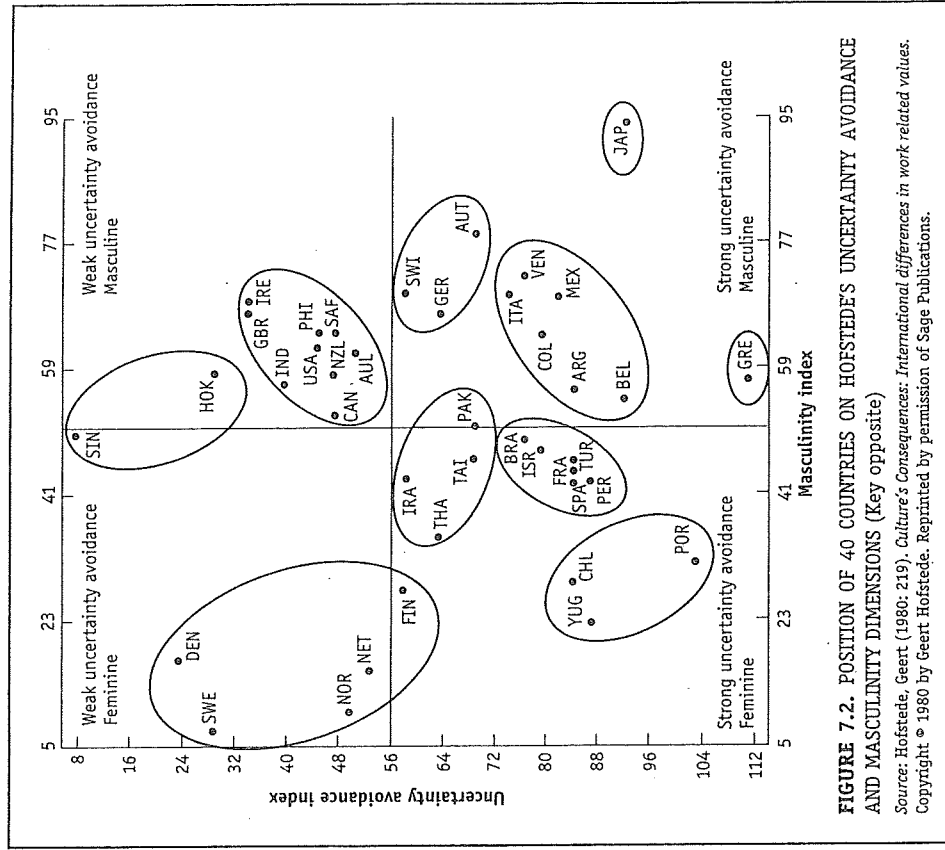


FIGURE 7.2. POSITION OF 40 COUNTRIES ON HOFSTEDE'S UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE AND MASCULINITY DIMENSIONS (Key opposite)

Source: Hofstede, Geert (1980: 219). *Culture's Consequences: International differences in work related values*. Copyright © 1980 by Geert Hofstede. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications.

ISR	Israel	PER	Peru	TAI	Taiwan
ITA	Italy	PHI	Philippines	THA	Thailand
JAP	Japan	POR	Portugal	TUR	Turkey
MEX	Mexico	SAF	South Africa	USA	United States
NET	Netherlands	SIN	Singapore	VEN	Venezuela
NOR	Norway	SPA	Spain	YUG	Yugoslavia
NZL	New Zealand	SWE	Sweden		
PAK	Pakistan	SWI	Switzerland		

nurturing. In cultures that score low on the masculinity dimension, these gender differences are less pronounced. Hofstede further found that highly masculine cultures tend to place more emphasis on work goals having to do with career advancement and earnings, whereas less masculine cultures favored work goals concerning interpersonal relationships, service, and the physical environment. Hofstede also found that women held fewer professional and technical jobs in highly masculine cultures such as Japan, Austria, and Venezuela, than in more feminine cultures such as Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands.

The importance of Hofstede's work is not only that it identified specific cultural differences between nations, but Hofstede also showed that organizational culture is an entry point for societal influence on organizations. These national cultural traits can be seen as part of the web of meaning that constitutes organizational culture. In a way, Hofstede's dimensions of cultural difference supply information about some of the core beliefs and assumptions that pervade organizational cultures, a topic we will now discuss in relation to Schein's theory of organizational culture.

SCHEIN'S MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Early in the 1980s, Edgar Schein, a social psychologist, developed what has become an influential theory of organizational culture.⁷ In Schein's theory, culture exists on three levels: on the surface we find artifacts, underneath artifacts lie values and behavioral norms, and at the deepest level lies a core of beliefs and assumptions. Schein's model of culture is shown in Figure 7.3 and the three levels it depicts are described below.

Beliefs and Assumptions

According to Schein, beliefs and assumptions form the core of an organization's culture. Assumptions represent what members believe to be reality and thereby influence what they perceive and how they think and feel. Assumptions are taken for granted. They exist outside ordinary awareness and are, for the most part, inaccessible to consciousness. Try to imagine what a fish thinks about water and you get an idea of the level of awareness cultural members usually have of their basic assumptions. From the perspective of the members of a culture, the set of basic assumptions is truth, and what they assume or believe to be real is generally not open for discussion. This unquestioned "truth" penetrates every aspect of cultural life and colors all forms of experience that it touches.

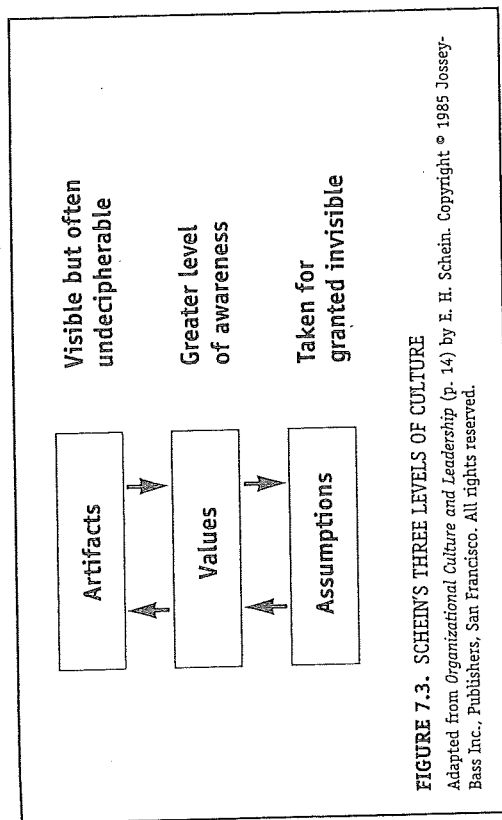


FIGURE 7.3. SCHEIN'S THREE LEVELS OF CULTURE
Adapted from *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (p. 14) by E. H. Schein. Copyright © 1985 Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, San Francisco. All rights reserved.

TABLE 7.2. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF "ORGANIZATIONAL MAN" EXPANDS WITH EACH NEW PERSPECTIVE IN ORGANIZATION THEORY

Perspective	Assumption	Focus/Values
Classical	Economic man	Wealth Power
Early Modern	Scientific man	Rationality Management Management control
Modern	Ecological man	Environment External control
Symbolic-Interpretive	Symbolic man	Interpretation Meaning
Postmodern	Aesthetic man	Creativity Freedom Responsibility

As an example, consider one type of basic assumption—the nature of human nature—and how it differs among the perspectives of organization theory (see Table 7.2). The assumption that humans are primarily concerned with wealth led classical scholars to develop ideas that focused on economic incentives. In contrast, the dominant assumption during the early days of modernism was that

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humans are primarily rational animals, and the theories developed during this period reflect the assumption of rationality in their mathematical equations for predicting human behavior. More recently, the assumptions of open systems theory have advanced a view of humans as interdependent parts of a system and are thus controlled by their environment. The symbolic-interpretive perspective, illustrated by the organizational culture movement in organization theory, assumes that humans are symbol makers and users and thus meaning is the proper focus of attention for organization theorists. The newest perspective in

TABLE 7.3. SCHEIN'S LIST OF BASIC CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

Dimension	Questions to be answered
1. The organization's relationship to its environment	Does the organization perceive itself to be to its environment dominant, submissive, harmonizing, searching out of niche?
2. The nature of human activity	Is the "correct" way for humans to behave to be dominant/pro-active, harmonizing, or passive/fatalistic?
3. The nature of reality and truth	How do we define what is true and what is not true: and how is truth ultimately determined both in the physical and social world? By pragmatic test, reliance on wisdom, or social consensus?
4. The nature of time	What is our basic orientation in terms of past, present, and future, and what kinds of time units are most relevant for the conduct of daily affairs?
5. The nature of human nature	Are humans basically good, neutral, or evil, and is human nature perfectible or fixed?
6. The nature of human	What is the "correct" way for people to relationships relate to each other, to distribute power and affection? Is life competitive or cooperative? Is the best way to organize society on the basis of individualism or groupism? Is the best authority system autocratic/paternalistic or collegial/participative?
7. Homogeneity vs. diversity	Is the group best off if it is highly diverse or if it is highly homogeneous, and should individuals in a group be encouraged to innovate or conform?

Adapted from *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (p. 86) by E. H. Schein. Copyright © 1985 Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, San Francisco. All rights reserved.

Organizational Culture

organization theory derives from the philosophy of postmodernism. One assumption of postmodernism is that human experience is fragmented. Such an assumption leads to accepting a diversity of interpretations, including those offered by Classical scholars and modernist and symbolic-interpretive organization theorists.

TABLE 7.4. SCHEIN'S EXTERNAL ADAPTATION VERSUS INTERNAL INTEGRATION TASKS

External adaptation tasks	Internal integration tasks
Developing consensus on:	Developing consensus on:
1. The core mission, functions, and primary tasks of the organization vis-à-vis its environments.	1. The common language and conceptual system to be used, including basic concepts of time and space.
2. The specific goals to be pursued by the organization.	2. The group boundaries and criteria for inclusion.
3. The basic means to be used in accomplishing the goals.	3. The criteria for the allocation of status, power, and authority.
4. The criteria to be used for measuring results.	4. The criteria for intimacy, friendship, and love in different work and family settings.
5. The remedial or repair strategies if goals are not achieved.	5. The criteria for the allocation of rewards and punishments.
	6. Concepts for managing the unmanageable—ideology and religion.

Adapted from *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (pp. 52, 66) by E. H. Schein. Copyright © 1985 Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, San Francisco. All rights reserved.

The differences in the assumptions described above help to explain how organization theorists have shifted from nearly total reliance on economics and engineering, to interest in cybernetics, human biology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and, recently, semiotics and literary theory (review Figure 1-1 in the first chapter). Schein claims that assumptions have the capacity to influence what members of a culture perceive and how they think and feel. Thus, differences in the basic assumptions held by proponents of different theoretical perspectives lead to different perceptions of what is central to explanations of organization and this, in turn, produces interest in the array of basic disciplines upon which organization theory has drawn.

Culture is not a single belief or assumption, it is a set of interrelated (but not necessarily consistent) beliefs and assumptions. Schein defines seven issues that

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must be resolved by every culture in each historical period and claims that giving your attention to how a culture resolves each of these will help you to define its core assumptions. In addition to the nature of human nature, these issues are: the organization's relationship to its environment, the nature of reality and truth, the nature of time, the nature of human activity, the nature of human relationships, and homogeneity vs. diversity (see Table 7.3).

Schein argues that the core assumptions that resolve these issues find their way into many aspects of organizing. Schein groups these into two categories: (1) external adaptation (mission and strategy, goals, means and control systems), and (2) internal integration (common language, group boundary definition, rewards and punishments, status and power relations) (see Table 7.4). But, according to Schein, the most important influences of core assumptions from the standpoint of shaping culture are norms, values, and artifacts.

Norms and Values

Values are the social principles, goals, and standards held within a culture to have intrinsic worth. They define what the members of an organization care about, such as freedom, democracy, tradition, wealth, or loyalty. Values constitute the basis for making judgments about what is right and what is wrong, which is why they are also referred to as a moral or ethical code. Because values are used as standards for making moral judgments, they are often associated with strong emotions. Values are more conscious than basic assumptions but are not usually on the top of members' minds. Nonetheless, members of an organization are able to recognize their values fairly easily and become especially aware of them when someone tries to change their culture in some fundamental way. When values are challenged, the challenge most often comes from marginal members of the organization, such as newcomers or revolutionaries, or from outsiders (see Figure 7.4).

Norms are closely associated with values. They are the unwritten rules that allow members of a culture to know what is expected of them in a wide variety of situations. Examples of social norms typical of American culture include: do not talk in a crowded movie theater while the movie is playing, do not cut in line, and only stand up at a football game when something really exciting is going on (that is, when everybody else is standing). Business norms involve concerns such as when you should inform your boss of potential problems, what sort of clothing you should wear, and whether or not it is appropriate to display emotion in the workplace.

While values specify what is important to the members of a culture, norms establish what sorts of behavior they can expect from one another. In short,

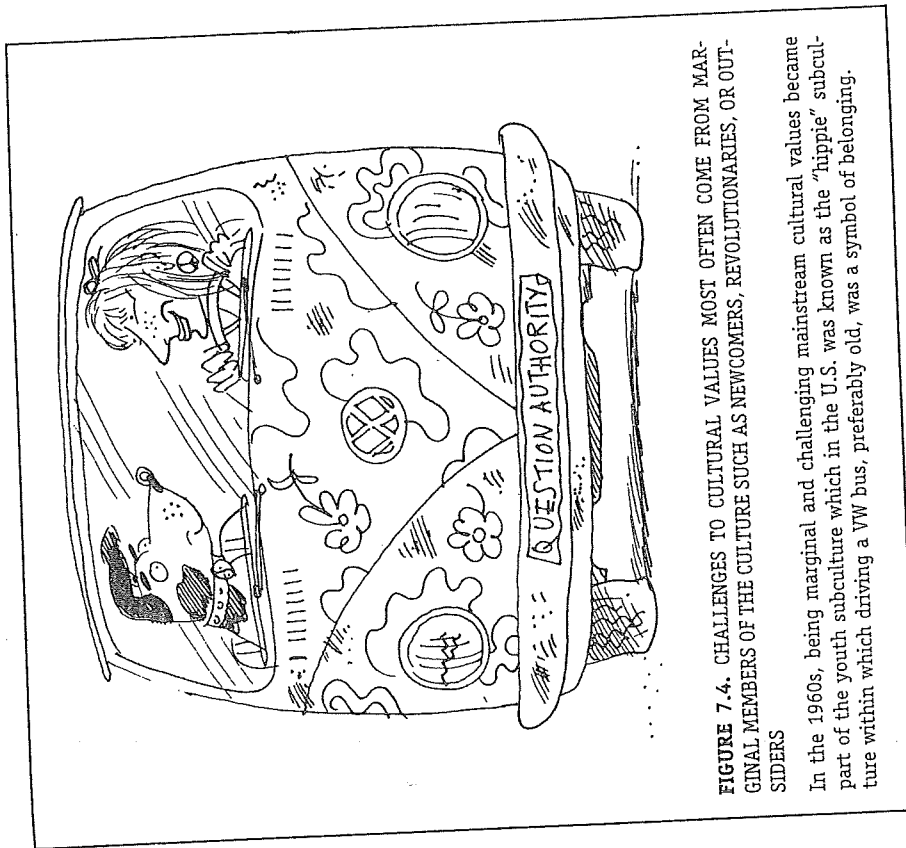


FIGURE 7.4. CHALLENGES TO CULTURAL VALUES MOST OFTEN COME FROM MARGINAL MEMBERS OF THE CULTURE SUCH AS NEWCOMERS, REVOLUTIONARIES, OR OUTSIDERS

In the 1960s, being marginal and challenging mainstream cultural values became part of the youth subculture which in the U.S. was known as the "hippie" subculture within which driving a VW bus, preferably old, was a symbol of belonging.

values define what is valued, while norms make clear what it takes to be considered normal or abnormal. The link between values and norms is that the behaviors that norms sanction (that is, reward or punish) usually can be traced to outcomes that are valued. For example, the norms about talking in movie theaters, cutting in line, and standing at football games might be traced to a cultural value for courtesy to others. Norms about wearing formal business attire (e.g., suits and ties) and not displaying any emotion while at work may indicate a value for self-discipline or for conformity with the American business ideal.

TABLE 7.5. ARTIFACTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

General category	Specific examples
physical manifestations	• art/design/logo • buildings/decor • dress/appearance • material objects • physical layout
behavioral manifestations	• ceremonies/rituals • communication patterns • traditions/customs • rewards/punishments
verbal manifestations	• anecdotes/jokes • jargon/names/nicknames • explanations • stories/myths/history • heroes/villains • metaphors

According to Schein's theory, the members of a culture hold values and conform to cultural norms because their underlying beliefs and assumptions nurture and support these norms and values. The norms and values, in turn, encourage activities that produce surface-level artifacts. Artifacts are further extensions or expressions of the same cultural core that maintains the values and norms.

Artifacts

You could think of artifacts as remains of the cultural core left strewn about on the surface of a culture, sort of like cooled lava is left lying around the earth's surface after a volcano has been active. In the same way that geologists study lava as evidence of what the earth's core is like, we can study artifacts as evidence of a culture's core. Artifacts are the visible, tangible, and audible remains of behavior grounded in cultural norms, values, and assumptions.⁸ Categories of artifacts include: physical objects created by the members of a culture, verbal manifestations seen in written and spoken language, and rituals, ceremonies, and other behavioral manifestations. Table 7.5 shows several examples of each category.

Members of a culture may or may not be aware of their culture's artifacts, but the artifacts themselves can be directly observed by anyone. From the researcher's viewpoint, artifacts are the most accessible elements of culture. Even

though they are highly accessible, however, remember that artifacts lie furthest from the cultural core. Their remoteness from the core indicates that they are easily misinterpreted by those who are culturally naive, including cultural researchers when they begin a new study.

How Culture Works

According to Schein, the essence of culture is its core of basic assumptions and established beliefs. This core reaches outward through the values and behavioral norms that are recognized, responded to, and maintained by members of the culture. The values and norms, in turn, influence the choices and other actions taken by cultural members. Finally, culturally guided action produces artifacts.

Schein claims that when new members are brought into a culture, they are either selected on the basis of the match between their values and those of the culture, or they are socialized to accept cultural values. Cultures change, but only when new values are brought in from outside the culture, for instance by the decree or example of top management. However, Schein emphasizes that new values will be incorporated into basic assumptions only after they have proved their worth in terms of desired organizational outcomes. Only when members of the culture can see their benefit, will new values become taken for granted and drop to the level of unconscious assumptions.

From the point of view offered by Schein's model, culture appears to be driven from the inside out—from the depths of unconscious assumptions, values, and norms to the surface where numerous artifacts can be observed. But this is not the end of the story; the arrows in Schein's model point both ways. At the same time that values and assumptions are pushing their way "up" to the level of artifacts, the artifacts are being interpreted in ways that can transform the very values and assumptions that produced them in the first place. This happens because artifacts and norms are consciously and creatively used by the members of a culture to express their identity and to formulate and pursue their purposes. To study this aspect of culture it is useful to turn from Schein's model to the symbolic tradition within organization theory.⁹

SYMBOLIC-INTERPRETIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THEORY

Early on, symbolic-interpretive culture researchers adopted Clifford Geertz, an American cultural anthropologist, as a sort of guru. One particular quotation

from his work is widely cited because it concisely and evocatively represents both the conceptual foundation of the symbolic-interpretive approach and Geertz's engaging spirit: "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."¹⁰

The symbolic-interpretive approach starts from the assumption that cultures are socially constructed realities, or, in Geertz's memorable terms, "webs of significance [man] himself has spun." You will remember from Chapter 2 that socially constructed reality refers to the idea that, for groups, organizations, and societies, reality is not formed by conditions in the natural or physical world as much as it is defined through interpersonal association and agreement. For example, a family does not require biological relationships, but it does depend upon the willingness of family members to define themselves as such and to engage in certain expected behaviors. The argument is that families can be created that have no genetic basis at all, as in the case of adoptions. Yet, when genetic parents and their children cease to define one another in these terms, the family usually dissolves, even though they may still live together.¹¹ It is in the sense that all cultures, including families and organizations, require cooperative effort and mutual self-definition that we say they are socially constructed. Socially constructed entities exist only so long as their members regard them as existing and behave accordingly.

The symbolic-interpretive approach in organizational culture studies is concerned with describing how organizational realities are socially constructed. Humans can engage in the socially constructed aspects of organizational life because they make, use, and interpret symbols and because they are sensitive to the interpretations made by others. The use and interpretation of symbols permits the members of an organization to create and maintain their culture. It is, therefore, through observation of symbol construction and use that culture comes to be known by the symbolic-interpretive researcher. When working within the symbolic-interpretive tradition, a culture researcher searches for the key symbols of a culture and seeks out local interpretations in order to glimpse cultural meaning from the native point of view.

Although symbolic-interpretive culture researchers steep themselves in the experiences and meanings of specific members of a culture, the objective of their search is a larger perspective than that of any individual member. The perspective sought is, ideally, that of the entire system of experiences and interpretations distributed across all the culture's members. The native view is not one native's view, but a delicate amalgamation that represents the whole culture in its full complexity. To gain this perspective, culture researchers describe the ways in

which the experiences and interpretations that they have collected fit together to form cultural patterns. The goal is to formulate patterns that are recognizable to cultural members, or at least to others who have been close to the culture.

Symbols

A symbol is anything that represents a conscious or unconscious association with some wider concept or meaning. Thus, a symbol consists of both a tangible form and the wider meaning (or meanings) with which it is associated. The dove, for example, is a commonly recognized symbol for peace (Figure 7.5). In this symbol the tangible form is the image of the bird; the meaning that extends beyond this form is peace.

The Mercedes-Benz logo is an example of a symbol associated with an organization. As a tangible form, this logo is usually a piece of metal with a distinctive shape. It is a designed artifact of a manufacturer of German automobiles. The logo signifies that a given automobile is the product of Daimler-Benz. In terms of symbolic meaning, however, the Mercedes logo extends well beyond both the tangible form of the artifact and its capacity to signify the maker. For instance, it is capable of symbolizing quality, luxury, and prestige. However, it can also symbolize overindulgence or the injustice of being poor. This illustrates an important point about symbols—the same symbol can support different, and even contradictory, meanings.

In the example of the Mercedes logo we see that management *can* exercise considerable control over the design and display of its artifacts, but the symbolic

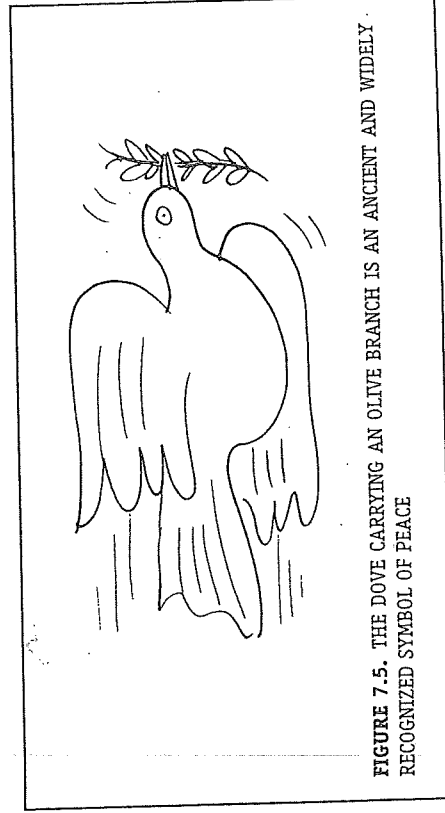


FIGURE 7.5. THE DOVE CARRYING AN OLIVE BRANCH IS AN ANCIENT AND WIDELY RECOGNIZED SYMBOL OF PEACE

messages with which artifacts become associated are far less easy to control. Many symbolic associations are unpredictable. Recognizing the difficulty of controlling symbolic meaning is important for understanding the symbolic approach to studying cultures.

Symbols come in many forms, but all of them fall into one of three broad categories: physical objects, behavioral events, and verbal expressions. Notice that these categories could easily be applied to the artifacts shown in Table 7.5. This is because there is a theoretical relationship between cultural symbols and artifacts. Cultural artifacts can become symbols, but not all artifacts do so. An artifact becomes a cultural symbol only when members of the culture attach meaning to it and use the symbol thus made to communicate meaning to others.¹² For instance, we can see that a national flag is a symbol by the responses given to it by members of the culture that it represents; in the case of the American flag, examples include saluting, waving, burning, and using it as an article of clothing. Notice, however, that an artifact can be used symbolically at one moment and not at the next (e.g., when the flag is tucked away in a drawer). What makes an artifact a symbol is its use by humans to make meaning. Notice also that recognizing that an artifact is being used as a symbol does not necessarily equate with knowing its meaning within the culture; meaning involves interpretation.

Interpretation

The symbolic-interpretive approach teaches us that symbols are inherently ambiguous; members of a culture can give different meanings to the same symbol as well as use different symbols to convey the same meaning. However, even though members may give ambiguous symbols private interpretations, their interpretations are formed under a more or less constant barrage of influence provided by other members of the culture such as bosses, gossip, newscasters, television personalities, and professors. Interpretations are not made in a vacuum, rather they, like the culture that embeds them, are socially constructed realities.

It is impossible to lay down a precise definition to capture all the nuances of meaning that the term "interpretation" evokes. The most effective way to communicate the idea is to tell you about some of the methods used by symbolic-interpretive researchers when they make cultural studies. Applying these methods will give you a direct and conscious experience of interpretation. The set of methods I will focus on is called ethnography.¹³

Ethnography: How to Make Cultural Studies of Organizations

Ethnography means cultural description, and the specific techniques that fall into the broad category of ethnographic methods are almost as varied as the definitions of culture. We will focus on ethnography produced via two general methods of data collection—observation and interviews. These methods have been chosen because culture researchers often rely upon some combination of these to produce their ethnographies. The typical organizational culture study proceeds from data collected by: (1) direct observation of artifacts and symbols and the uses to which members of a culture put them, and (2) interviews with cultural members focused on discovering their ways of experiencing and interpreting their world. Analysis and cultural description follow data collection.

Step 1—Data Collection

You cannot directly experience another person's values, assumptions, or symbolic interpretations, but you can directly experience their artifacts. Therefore, observation of artifacts and the behavior that occurs around them is a typical starting point in a study of culture. At the start of your study, artifacts will appear as isolated objects, events, or linguistic forms (e.g., stories, jokes, metaphors). Tempting as it may seem, it is unwise to interpret these first artifacts until additional evidence is collected. The best way to proceed is to examine as many artifacts as possible, making extensive notes about the artifacts and the symbolic uses to which you see them put in the daily lives of organizational members.

Through interviews you will then try to discover the interpretations that members give to the artifacts you have observed. Try to write down or tape record as much of their actual language as possible rather than putting the members' ideas into your own words. Sometime during this part of your study, you will begin to sense the degree of symbolic significance in the artifacts you have collected. Make notes about these feelings, and also jot down what caused you to believe a particular artifact was acting as a symbol within the culture. Keep notes about your hunches, feelings, and ideas in a separate field journal so that they do not become confused with your descriptions, which are called your field notes. Take care with all of the notes that you keep because they are the raw data for your analysis. Take them out from time to time and play with them as you might play with a collection of rocks or seashells.

Step 2—Phase I: Analysis

During phase I of data analysis, your data must be organized and reorganized until patterns suggesting specific norms and values (the Schein model) and symbolic themes (the symbolic approach) can be found. You will know that you have collected and analyzed enough evidence when you find that you are able to link a fair number of artifacts to several norms and values and that you can identify the convergence of some key symbols on one or more cultural themes (e.g., aggression, innocence). It is likely that you will find it useful to go back into the field during this phase of your analysis. This is because, as it progresses, your analysis will suggest additional places to look for artifacts and symbols and additional questions to ask of cultural members.

Do not force your analysis at this or any other stage of your cultural study. Instead, allow your answers to emerge from the process. Ethnographers often describe this emergence by saying that “the data speak” to them. What they mean is that you should keep reading and rereading your notes, and arranging and rearranging the artifacts and symbols you find there until you begin to feel that the data have their own order and meaning. This procedure is designed to minimize the chances that you will impose an order or a meaning onto the data based only on your own biases or strictly personal interpretations.

Step 3—Phase II: Analysis and Description

When you feel comfortable that a larger picture of the culture is emerging from the first phase of your analysis, the data, along with the emerging norms, values, and symbolic themes, are further sorted and organized. This second phase continues, along the lines of the first, until the deeper beliefs, assumptions, and symbolic patterns of meaning linking the norms, values, and themes begin to reveal themselves. This is the point at which it is appropriate to try to finalize your description of the order in your data. Do so. If you have insurmountable difficulties, go back to the data and continue processing, going all the way back to data collection if you feel the need.

A word of warning: because the deep patterns you are seeking are theoretically distant from the original observations on which your study is based, the second phase of analysis is considerably more challenging than the first. As a consequence, your level of confidence will seem to ebb away as you move from considering norms, values, and symbolic themes to trying to define beliefs, assumptions, and webs of meaning. This loss of confidence is natural. You are not alone, all ethnographers must learn to cope with this aspect of cultural analysis, as Geertz makes clear:

There is an Indian story—at least I heard it as an Indian story—about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.” . . . I [have never] gotten anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have ever written about . . . Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right.¹⁴

You cannot avoid uncertainty *and* do a successful culture study. In fact, you would not want to. Facing the uncertainties inherent in cultural description will help you come to grips with the inadequacy of a single mind attempting to understand an entire organization. Press on. Although you will probably never reach the ideal of complete clarity, you will learn a great deal about culture by trying. In the process, you may also enhance your ability to handle uncertainty.

An Example of Cultural Analysis

Illustrating the ethnographic approach to understanding organizational culture demands a rich example. Our example comes from a colorful American culture that developed around the Chicago Cubs baseball team—the Cubs fans. The analysis begins with a general description of the baseball game as a cultural event. Following this, I will describe a notorious ritual that occurs during baseball games (themselves a kind of ceremony) that take place at Wrigley Field, the Cubs’ home stadium located in Chicago, Illinois.

The baseball game is a key cultural event for every baseball organization. A team’s reputation hinges on how many games it can win. Winning a game depends upon scoring “runs,” so the run is particularly meaningful within baseball cultures. A run requires that a player (“the batter”) hit the baseball so that it comes down within the playing field (“in fair territory”) but is not caught by the opposing team before it touches the ground. The ball is then considered to be “in play.” When this happens, the player (now called “the runner”) must run around a diamond-shaped path (“the diamond”) painted in white on the playing field. During his run, the player must step on each corner of the diamond which is marked by a “base.” Meanwhile, the opponents try to carry or throw the ball back and “tag” either the runner or the base that the runner is approaching, before he can make it around all the bases. Runners who cannot complete the run try to stop on one of the bases, where they will be “safe.” If an opponent can tag a runner while he is between two bases, the runner is declared “out” which means he

is no longer in position to score a run. If safe, he must wait for another batter from his team to hit the ball into play or for the pitcher to walk a batter or make a mistake (e.g., throw a wild pitch).

Players who cross "home plate" score a run. The most decisive way to score a run is to hit the ball "out of the park," which generally means into the seats ("grandstands" or "bleachers") where the audience sits, but can literally mean hitting the ball over the back wall. Such a hit has a special name—a "homerun" or "homer." Because of the difficulty and the advantages of hitting a homerun, this particular act is given high regard, in fact, a homerun is considered a heroic achievement for a ballplayer. For a baseball fan, the commensurate achievement is catching a homerun ball. At Wrigley Field, non-paying fans even stand outside the park in case a homer is hit over the wall, at which point there is a mad scramble to grab the ball. Baseball fans honor homerun balls they have caught by placing them on special display pedestals or in lucite cases, some even inscribe their display case with the date on which they caught the ball.

Some years ago, fans of the Chicago Cubs baseball team introduced an interesting cultural twist to the tradition of catching homerun balls: at home games, if a Cubs fan catches a homerun ball hit by the opposing team, they are expected to throw the ball back onto the field. Within baseball culture, returning a homerun ball to the field clearly communicates that the ball is worthless and, by implication, that this homerun was an insignificant achievement. The act is a symbolic insult thrown (along with the actual ball) at the opposing team. Within baseball cultures, harassing the opposition is a time-honored tradition. For example, catcher's banter ("Hey-batter-hey-batter-hey-batter") while the ball is being pitched is designed to interrupt the concentration of the batter as he prepares to swing. Other examples include mocking the opposing team with the ridiculing behavior of team mascots or displays of humorous messages on computerized scoreboards.

The gesture of the returned homerun ball *could* be interpreted simply as one among many forms of harassment that exist within all American baseball cultures. But there is more to this story because fans of other teams do not engage in this particular practice. Although their catchers also *razz* batters and they too mock the opposing team, fans of other teams keep homerun balls regardless of which team hit them (some fans spend hundreds of hours and a great deal of money attending games hoping for such an unlikely catch). Therefore, prying a Cubs fan loose from a prize like a homerun ball is a cultural achievement worthy of notice—and careful cultural analysis.

First, it should be recognized that throwing a homerun ball back is a considerable personal sacrifice for a Cubs fan, just as it would be for a fan of any other team. Second, if you watch carefully during the unfolding of several of these events, you will observe that the fan who has caught the ball does not always give

it up immediately. Throwing the ball back can require prodding. This is accomplished by loud booing clearly directed at the fan. The booing continues, increasing in volume, until the ball is returned to the field, and the (now) compliant fan is rewarded with a hearty cheer. Of course, fans who are well-established members of the culture require no prodding and they gleefully throw the ball back while the runner is still trotting around the bases enjoying his moment of glory. Non-paying fans outside the stadium have even been known to throw retrieved balls back over the wall!

Another interesting twist is found on careful examination of videotapes of these events. The tapes show some fans switching a caught ball for their own, perhaps older, or non-official, ball that they then throw back onto the field in feigned compliance with the cultural norm.¹⁵ Finally, you should know that the Cub's local tradition of throwing homerun balls back onto the field is spreading, fans of other clubs have picked up the idea and are diffusing this ritual throughout the rest of American baseball culture.

Now let us apply some culture concepts to the Cubs example. Underlying cultural assumptions and beliefs produce, among other things, a value for homerun balls, a competitive urge, and knowledge of effective ways to sanction the behavior of other members of the culture. In the case of the Cubs fans, shared cultural understandings are manifested in the norm for throwing back opponents' homerun balls. This cultural norm is reinforced by booing (negative sanction using a verbal symbol) and subsequent cheering (positive sanction using a different verbal symbol) that we see within the cultural ritual (artifact). The ritual consists of a fan first catching (a ritual Cubs fan culture holds in common with other American baseball cultures) an opponent's homerun ball (artifact about to become a physical symbol) and then throwing it back onto the field (a ritual unique to the Cubs fan culture and also a behavioral symbol of disrespect).

At this point you would probably like to draw some further conclusions about the underlying assumptions of this culture. Resist this urge! Remember, we have only considered *one* cultural event at this point and we need a great deal more information to do a credible job of analyzing the culture. Nonetheless, this illustration should give you some appreciation for the richness provided by a cultural understanding of organizations and for the requirements of doing such analyses.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUBCULTURES

In understanding the dynamics of Cubs fan culture we used information about cultural forces associated with the entire domain of American baseball and about

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specific baseball organizations within this larger domain. This illustrates the concept of subcultures—different baseball teams and their fans comprise subcultures within American baseball culture. Two American contributors to the development of the subculture school within organization theory, John van Maanen and Stephen Barley, define subculture as:

a subset of an organization's members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group within the organization, share a set of problems commonly defined to be the problems of all, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group.¹⁶

Compare this definition of subculture with the definitions of culture shown in Table 7.1. The comparison underscores the similarity between subcultures and organizational cultures. The main difference is that, instead of seeing a culture as one unitary whole, as Schein does for example, the subculture view paints a picture of numerous small cultures (i.e., the subcultures) all existing within the same organization. Several ways to envision this are illustrated in Figure 7.6.

The seemingly minor amount of difference between the concepts of culture and subculture has a major implication. The subculture view opens up the concept of organizational culture with about the same effect as the opening of Pandora's box in Greek mythology. Once the box is opened, we must live with the chaos we have unleashed. In the case of subcultures, the chaos is an image of culture that is far more complex and contradictory than it ever appeared to be

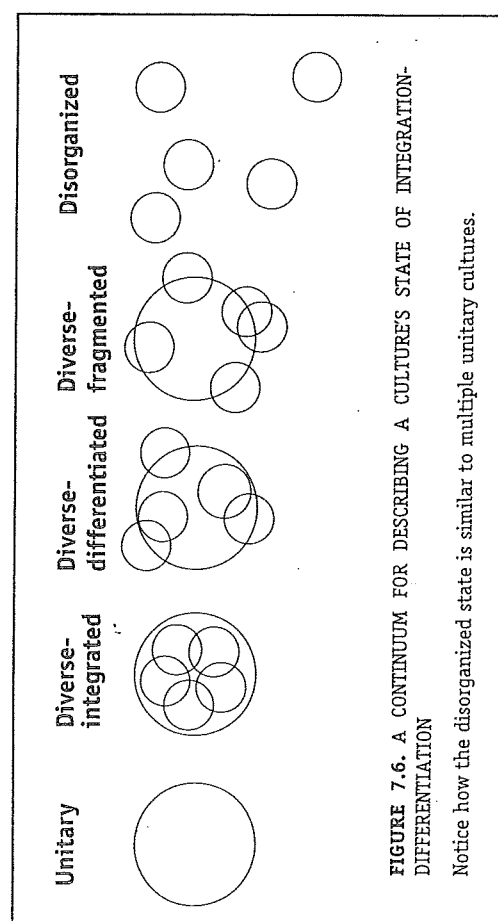


FIGURE 7.6. A CONTINUUM FOR DESCRIBING A CULTURE'S STATE OF INTEGRATION-DIFFERENTIATION

Notice how the disorganized state is similar to multiple unitary cultures.

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within the unitary framework offered by Schein.¹⁷ The subculture view makes us acutely aware of the many differences that distinguish multiple subcultures coexisting within a single organization.

At the organizational level, we are faced with untangling how all of the subcultures relate to each other and discovering how they fit together to form the larger organizational culture. This is the same situation we face when we try to understand an organizational culture in relationship to its environment. At the environmental level, the entire organizational culture can be thought of as a single subculture within an even larger cultural framework, such as a societal culture (Figure 7.7). Here an organizational subculture is seen as equivalent to a sub-societal culture.

Finally, let us return to the possibilities illustrated in Figure 7.6. Consider a continuum that ranges from unity through integration, differentiation, and fragmentation to disintegration. Different organizational cultures can be placed along the continuum according to the relative degree of unity-fragmentation among their subcultures. That is, the greater the degree of fragmentation among subcultures, the closer the organizational culture will come to the end of the continuum marked "fragmented." Another way to look at this idea is to think about tracing changes in a particular culture in order to describe shifting levels of unity and fragmentation within the organization. This view allows us to see that cultures are not static, but shift and change over time.

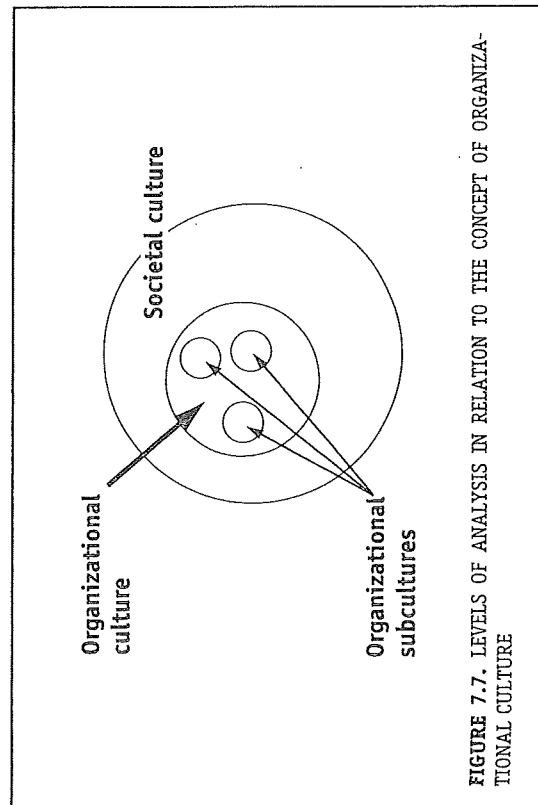


FIGURE 7.7. LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN RELATION TO THE CONCEPT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Types of Subcultures

The subculture approach introduces the interesting question of what distinguishes the subcultures of an organization from one another. Subculture researchers have so far proposed two frameworks for describing these differences.

American organizational culture researchers Caren Siehl and Joanne Martin believe that subcultures are defined in relation to an organization's overall cultural patterns, especially with respect to the culture's dominant values.¹⁸ In this view, subcultures are classified according to whether they support, deny, or simply exist alongside the dominant values of the overall culture. Enhancing subcultures support the dominant values with great enthusiasm. Countercultures defy the dominant values of the larger culture of which they are a part. Orthogonal subcultures maintain their own, independent values alongside the dominant values of the overall culture.

Another group of researchers distinguishes subcultures on the bases of occupation, work group, hierarchical level, and previous organizational affiliations.¹⁹ For example, two occupational subcultures found in many R & D organizations are professional business managers (e.g., MBAs) and scientists (or designers). Work group subcultures are likely to be found wherever the requirements of their jobs cause people to work closely together. Project teams, branch offices, and small or physically isolated departmental units are good places to look for work group subcultures.²⁰ Hierarchical subcultures emphasize the distinction between different levels of management or between management and workers, the latter sometimes becoming institutionalized in union-management relations. Subcultures based on previous organizational affiliations can often be found in organizations formed by merger or acquisition, for example the innovative (former Sperry employees) and bureaucratic (former Burroughs employees) subcultures produced by the 1986 Unisys merger.²¹

Why are there Subcultures?

Van Maanen and Barley make two observations about human behavior that help to explain the occurrence of subcultures.²² First is the interpersonal attraction explanation. Psychological studies have shown that people tend to be attracted to others they see as like themselves. This suggests that, in general, similar people will be attracted to an occupation, a job, a position in the hierarchy (management or worker), or a particular organization. To the extent that this is true, the interpersonal attraction hypothesis provides a reason for subculture differentiation

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along the lines of these differences. Other ways in which people are similar include age, gender, and memberships in other organizations (churches, schools, sports clubs, etc.). These similarities also contribute to subcultural differentiation in organizations.

A second explanation for subcultural differentiation involves interaction among the members of an organization. Studies of group dynamics show that when individuals regularly engage in interaction, groups are more likely to form and become cohesive. Thus, interaction patterns also explain subcultural differentiation. Task interdependence, reporting relationships, proximity, design of offices and work stations, and shared equipment or facilities (e.g., copy machines, coffee dispensers, mailboxes, break rooms) all bring certain members of an organization into contact with one another. Look for these as possible contributors to the formation of subcultures.

Of course, the forces of interpersonal attraction and opportunities to interact may combine to explain patterns of subculture formation. To see this more clearly, consider a hierarchical subculture found in many organizations: the top management team. Most members of top management are older than other members of the organization, in many firms they are all male, may have the same level of education, and surprisingly often have attended the same or similar schools (e.g., a prestigious university). Their histories within the organization will differ by their areas of expertise and their power bases, but they are probably united in their desire to promote the overall interests of the organization within its environment. Members of top management usually interact regularly and more often than not, occupy offices located next to one another and clearly marked off from the rest of the organization. Contrast the situation of top management with that of middle-level managers. Middle managers are usually located near their subordinates and so are spatially disbursed throughout the organization leaving them relatively limited opportunities to interact with each other. Middle managers also are more likely to have goals that conflict with the goals of other managers at their level, and their age, gender composition, and educational backgrounds are usually more varied than those of the top management team.

CULTURE AS FRAGMENTATION: A POSTMODERN VIEW

American organizational culture researchers Joanne Martin and Debra Meyerson identify three distinct perspectives within the field of organizational culture studies: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation.²³ In the integration perspective, organizational culture is described as being shared by all members of the

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culture in an organization-wide consensus. This view is illustrated by Schein's theory of organizational culture. The differentiation perspective takes a subcultural point of view and describes how organizational unity is fractured by subcultures. Subcultures themselves, however, are depicted in much the same way as unitary cultures—as consensual, consistent, coherent, stable wholes. The fragmentation perspective, which embraces a postmodern view of organizational culture, looks for neither consistency nor stability. Instead it focuses on the ways in which organizational cultures are inconsistent, ambiguous, multiplicitous, and in a constant state of flux.

According to Martin, the fragmentation perspective can be defined as a postmodern critique of the differentiation perspective. The focus of the critique is on the way in which the differentiation perspective identifies subcultures using dichotomous or oppositional thinking (e.g., labor versus management, staff versus line, men versus women, blacks versus whites, smokers versus non-smokers). Says Martin, "subcultures [usually] represent ends of a dichotomy, and one of these dichotomous alternatives is viewed as having a higher status than the other." She continues:

One problem with dichotomous thinking is that it oversimplifies and misrepresents the attributes and viewpoints of members of lower status groups. When differences between groups are defined using dichotomies or other forms of oppositional thinking, the terms of these definitions are usually based on the characteristics and viewpoints of the dominant group.²⁴

As an example of oppositional thinking, Martin offers some observations about racial differences in American organizations. She writes:

what it means to be black in a given organizational context has meaning only in so far as being black is seen as being not-white. Racial differences are assessed within an established hierarchical system that begins with dimensions of comparison relevant to the dominant group. Thus, not surprisingly, on these dimensions whites are seen as having more status and greater value than blacks. In this kind of oppositional thinking, attributes of the subordinated group that are unique to that group, and might be valued differently, fall outside the established hierarchy reified by the dichotomy and are ignored.²⁵

In place of oppositional thinking, the fragmentation perspective offers acknowledgement of multiplicity. That is, the fragmentation perspective begins from the observation that, although there is only one way in which things may be considered the same, there are multiple ways in which they can be different. For example, there are many ways in which being black can be defined in terms that have nothing to do with the black is not-white opposition, but all of them require taking an other-than-white perspective. Doing so produces the experi-

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ence of multiplicity—at least for whites. One implication of multiplicity is that identity becomes fragmented. For instance, Martin describes persons with mixed racial ancestry who get by, for example, by learning to be Indian in Mexican culture and Mexican in Anglo culture.²⁶

Martin suggests that not only racial identity, but gender, occupation, hierarchical position, and many other identifying characteristics may be perceived as oppositional but are actually multiplicitous and that they all co-exist within members of organizations. Because of the variety of individual bases of identity, allegiances to subcultures may constantly shift with the issues of debate or discourse. As Martin puts it:

when two cultural members agree (or disagree) on a particular interpretation of, say, a ritual, this is likely to be a temporary and issue-specific congruence (or incongruence). It may well not reflect agreement or disagreement on other issues, at other times. Subcultures, then, are reconceptualized as fleeting, issue-specific coalitions that may or may not have a similar configuration in the future. This is not simply a failure to achieve subcultural consensus in a particular context; from the Fragmentation perspective this is the most consensus possible in any context.²⁷

In this view, alliances or coalitions can never stabilize into subcultures and certainly not into unified cultures because discourse and its focal issues are always changing—hence the image of fragmentation.

CULTURE IN THE MODERNIST PERSPECTIVE

Modernists follow symbolic-interpreters in believing that assumptions and values influence behavior through their expression in norms and expectations and communicate identity through symbols, tradition, and customs. The difference comes in the way in which knowledge about culture is used by proponents of each perspective. Symbolic-interpreters define culture as a context for meaning making and interpretation. In their view, awareness of assumptions and values offers a framework for knowing yourself in relation to those around you. Knowledge of this relationship is what permits insight into culture, your own as well as somebody else's. Modernists, on the other hand, interpret knowledge about culture as a tool of management, and culture itself as a variable to be manipulated to enhance the likelihood of achieving desired levels of performance from others within the organization.²⁸

The difference between modern and symbolic-interpretive uses of the culture concept derives, in part at least, from the epistemological departure point each takes. Whereas modernists believe in scientific detachment from the object of

study (which defines an outsider's view), symbolic-interpreativists claim that cultural meaning can only be encountered and understood from within the cultural system in question. These differences come to a head in debate about whether subjective approaches can be scientific. Modernists argue against this proposition. To support their position they cite the rules of the scientific method and its requirement of scientific objectivity. Symbolic-interpreativists counter that not only is a subjectivist approach to science possible, but that the scientific objectivity claimed by modernists is an illusion. They claim that no observation of phenomena is free of the effects of the observational act, thus, there can be no such thing as an outsider's objective perspective, especially when it comes to understanding something as subjective as cultural meaning.

Symbolic-interpreativists contend that what modernists measure when they claim to study culture, usually with survey questionnaires, is simply a reflection of their own culture of academic research. This is because respondents are forced to formulate answers to survey questions in the terms set out by the survey writers rather than in their own terms. The difference is one of being sensitive to context. Symbolic-interpreativists argue that meaning is dependent on the context in which artifacts and symbols are encountered. You have, no doubt, had the experience of having your words taken out of context, for example when someone uses something you have said against you in an argument. Similarly, you have probably heard politicians make this claim in defending themselves against charges made by the press or other politicians. The act of taking a cultural symbol out of context has a similar effect on meaning. Thus, when symbolic-interpreativists talk about contextualizing in regard to cultural analysis, they are advocating studying artifacts and symbols in the situations and locations in which they naturally occur (e.g., via ethnographic observation), allowing organizational members to use and speak about them as they ordinarily do (e.g., via ethnographic interviewing). Their goal is to enter the cultural context of the organization and learn to understand it from the inside.

The goal of modernist research, on the other hand, is to develop generalized knowledge that can be applied across contexts. Thus, the modernist approach is decontextualized by definition. Modernists argue their own case by pointing out that symbolic-interpreativists are so context sensitive that, although they generate rich images of particular cultures, there is not much practical value in their efforts outside of the settings in which their images are developed. What is more, the ethnographic methods of symbolic-interpreative researchers are so time-consuming that their work is economically impractical. The modernist position is that it is better to sacrifice some contextual sensitivity than to give up cross-organizational comparisons. Be sure to notice in these arguments the traces of underlying values of the symbolic-interpreative and modernist perspectives.

Whereas symbolic-interpreativists' arguments symbolize a value for sympathetic understanding of others, the modernist argument gives evidence of values for efficiency and control.

Modernist studies generally involve looking at statistical relationships between variables representing organizational culture and performance. To quantify cultural variables requires choosing a particular dimension or dimensions of the culture construct to measure. So far, modernist cultural researchers have given the most attention to a variable they call **cultural strength**. Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy first described cultural strength as the extent to which organizational members share core values.²⁹ Deal and Kennedy claim that cultural strength is indicated by the presence of many symbols and artifacts associated with core values.

Measuring cultural strength can be much more difficult than defining it. For example, one way to measure cultural strength might be to ask survey respondents about the extent to which they agree or disagree with certain value-laden statements. The variance in the responses to the statements could then be computed for all (or a statistical sample of) members of each organization to be studied and this number used to estimate the organization's cultural strength. Observations of cultural strength for numerous organizations could then be used to form a variable and compute its correlation with other measures, such as organizational performance. However, not only would it be difficult to collect the necessary data, since the cooperation of an enormous number of individuals would be required, but the quality of the measure would depend on whether or not the researchers who wrote the questionnaire correctly identified the core values of each organization and communicated them effectively in the survey items.

American researchers John Kotter and James Heskett, used a different method to measure the cultural strength of over 200 corporations.³⁰ They contacted financial analysts and managers of firms that were in competition with the organizations they wanted to study and asked them to rate the cultural strength of their sample firms. They formulated an average score for each firm and then correlated this measure with organizational performance measured in terms of average yearly increases in net income, average yearly return on investment, and average yearly change in stock price (i.e., market value of the firm). These researchers found that although strong culture is significantly related to organizational performance overall, when cultural values support organizational adaptation to the environment, the relationship becomes much stronger. More explicitly, culture has an important influence on organizational performance when it either helps the organization to anticipate or adapt to environmental change (positive influence on performance) or interferes with its adaptation to

the environment (negative influence on performance). When cultures do not support adaptation, cultural strength can interfere with performance. Kotter and Heskett argue that this is because culture can blind organizational members to information that does not match their assumptions and because an entrenched culture can resist efforts to implement new strategies.

Organizational theorist Dan Denison follows a similar line of reasoning in his theory of the relationships between environment, strategy, and culture.³¹ Based on the findings of his research, Denison claims that organizations operating in rapidly changing environments will perform best if they either value flexibility and change (Denison calls this an adaptability culture) or participation and high levels of organizational commitment (which he calls an involvement culture). In stable environments, Denison argues, successful organizations either share a vision of the future (the mission culture) or have strong values for tradition, established procedures, and conformity (a consistency culture). You will recognize Denison's approach as an extension of modernist contingency theory.

Managing Culture

The question of whether or not cultures can be managed is largely a modernist concern that has provoked a long and, at times emotional, debate among organization theorists. For those who believe that culture can be managed, culture theory holds a promise of new forms of managerial influence and control in organizations.³² This group reasons that, if culture influences behavior via norms and values, then it should be possible to manage the norms and values of the organization in such a way that desired behaviors and other organizational performance outcomes are more or less guaranteed. Such control might come, for instance, through recruiting and hiring practices aimed at finding value-compatible employees.³³ Those who oppose the idea that culture can be managed argue that, since norms and values are grounded in deeply rooted basic assumptions and unquestioned beliefs, the possibilities for managing culture are severely limited.

One unexamined assumption within this debate is the belief that top managers are the most influential members of an organizational culture. Because of their enormous visibility to other members and because the power structure favors them, their behavior sets a standard for others and their words have great likelihood of being heard. This opportunity to influence, however, does not necessarily guarantee that the intentions of top managers will be understood or that they will be acted upon by other members of the culture. This is the heart of the culture as control debate. Those who believe culture can be used as a mechanism of control are accused by those who do not of being unrealistic about the potential

to control interpretations. Others, such as some postmodernists, go further and argue about the ethics of control or the benefits of relinquishing control (e.g., to innovation, personal freedom, the democratic process).

The symbolic-interpretive approach to culture theory offers a way to carve out a middle ground in this debate. From this perspective it can be argued that managers have the potential to become powerful symbols within their organizations.³⁴ As symbols, managers represent the meanings that other employees associate with the organization. However, it should be recognized that the symbolic power of managers and the meanings that they represent depend upon the interpretations that other members of the culture give to them, thus, successful leadership requires adaptation to the symbolic interpretation schemes that constitute the organizational culture.³⁵ This argument recognizes that managers are themselves part of the culture and are, therefore, likely to be managed by cultural influence even while they are trying to be managers of the culture. In other words, managers are artifacts who would like to be symbols.

The implication, and I believe the central message of the symbolic-interpretive study of organizational culture, is that, rather than trying to manage culture through *cultural change* programs, you should consider your cultural context whenever you contemplate or carry out *organizational change*. When you attempt to change organizational culture, while it is true that something will change, generally the changes are unpredictable and sometimes undesirable (e.g., increases in employee cynicism toward cultural change programs). This does not mean that concern for culture is unwarranted. To the contrary, it is essential. But you need to give up thinking of culture as an entity and trying to understand what it does. Instead, think of culture as a context for meaning making and interpretation. Do not think of trying to manage culture. Other people's meanings and interpretations are highly unmanageable. Think instead about trying to culturally manage your organization, that is, manage your organization with cultural awareness of the multiplicity of meanings that will be made of you and your efforts.

SUMMARY

An organization can be viewed as a culture in its own right, as a set of subcultures, or as an artifact through which an even larger culture expresses itself. We have emphasized the first and second of these viewpoints in this chapter, since these are the perspectives from which organizational members typically think about their organization. Nonetheless, effects of larger cultures are part of the organizational environment and will, therefore, be an important part of a complete

organizational analysis, as Hofstede's study of the influence of national cultures indicates. The environmental context of the organization should be kept in mind as the analysis of organizational culture (or any other aspect of the organization) is pursued.

Culture involves the members of an organization in a socially constructed reality. Organizational members share this reality in the dual senses of similarity and difference. The elements upon which cultural sharing is based include artifacts, symbols, norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions (from Schein's perspective), and physical, behavioral, and linguistic symbols (from the symbolic point of view). These cultural elements are interrelated in a web of interwoven meanings—a set of core assumptions and a worldview—accessible to all members of the culture (or subculture, if that is your level of analysis). The worldview aids members in managing their activities and in making sense out of their organizational experiences. This socially constructed context, to which cultural members routinely orient their experience and activity, is what we refer to as organizational culture.

No amount of talk about culture will substitute for the direct experience of studying a culture yourself. In order to appreciate fully the power and value of the cultural perspective you will have to personally go into an organization and look for artifacts and symbols and listen to interpretations. When you rely upon others to study your culture for you, you miss the opportunity to broaden your experience of your organizations and limit the development of your symbolic potential.

KEY TERMS

native view	ethnography
the culture metaphor	field journal
assumptions	field notes
values	subculture
norms	fragmentation perspective
artifacts	contextualize
symbol	cultural strength
interpretation	

ENDNOTES

1. Phillips, Goodman, and Sackmann (1992).
2. Williams (1983).
3. Tylor (1871\1958: 1).
4. Herskowitz (1948: 625).
5. Allaire and Firsirotu (1984); Eisenberg and Riley (1988).
6. The idea that organizational culture theory can be divided into three schools of thought (integration, differentiation, fragmentation) was developed by Meyerson and Martin (1987; Martin 1992).
7. Schein (1981, 1984, 1985, 1992).
8. Gagliardi (1990).
9. Hatch (1993).
10. Geertz (1973: 5).
11. I am grateful to Kristian Kreiner, who suggested this example.
12. Ormer (1973); Hatch (1993).
13. Van Maanen (1988).
14. Geertz (1973: 28-29).
15. I am grateful to Joe Harder for alerting me to these videotaped incidents.
16. Van Maanen and Barley (1985: 38).
17. Martin (1992); Meyerson and Martin (1987).
18. Martin and Siehl (1983).
19. Van Maanen and Barley (1984); Borum and Strandgaard-Pedersen (1989).
20. Young (1989).
21. Borum and Strandgaard-Pedersen (1989); Molin and Strandgaard-Pedersen (1992).
22. Van Maanen and Barley (1984).
23. Meyerson and Martin (1987); Martin (1992).24. Martin (1992: 135-36).
25. Ibid. 136.
26. Ibid. 156, citing Anzaldúa (1987: 79) and Rosaldo (1989: 216).
27. Martin (1992: 138).
28. Denison (1990).
29. Deal and Kennedy (1982).
30. Korter and Heskett (1992).
31. Denison (1990).
32. Peters and Waterman (1982); Ouchi (1980); Kilmann, Saxton and Serpa (1986); Wilkins and Ouchi (1983).
33. Kilmann, Saxton, and Serpa (1986); O'Reilly (1989); O'Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell (1991).
34. Pfeffer (1981).
35. Hatch (1993).

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