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Defining and Assessing Organizational Culture

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The target of much debate, organizational culture has occupied a prominent position in multidisciplinary publications since the early 1980s. Fraught with inconsistencies, the early research and literature addressing organizational culture was often conflicting and recursive. As one researcher stated, culture is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams, 1983). Years of conceptualization, comparison and assessment have led to an emerging consensus on the appropriate definition and role for organizational culture. This manuscript documents the historical development of organizational culture as a construct and its ensuing assessment, comparing and contrasting prominent theories and methods of understanding organizational culture. Subsequently, a brief review of the health care literature illustrates the applicability of organizational culture to the health care setting.

Development

Most researchers agree that the notion of studying work environments first emerged with the work of a social psychologist, Kurt Lewin. Lewin, Lippitt **and** White (1939) first coined the term organizational climate in the study "Patterns of Aggressive Behavior in Experimentally Created 'Social Climates.'" This term was used inconsistently for the next two decades until the 1960s. By this point, research on organizational climate research was flourishing.

Climate research represented a convergence of psychological and sociological epistemologies. During the 1960s and 1970s, climate research generally addressed professional socialization and the orientation or integration of the new employee. The terms climate and culture were often used interchangeably or within quotation marks, and were not well defined conceptually (Reichers & Schneider, 1990). In the mid-1970s the emergence of symbolic framing introduced anthropologic epistemology to the study of organizational climate. Among climate researchers, the sense that the climate construct was not capturing the holism of the work environment led to the development of organizational culture. Hence, this represented the beginning of defining culture, acknowledging its intangibility and integrating psychologic, sociologic and anthropologic methods and philosophies (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000).

Pettigrew (1979) was the first to introduce formally the term organizational culture, incorporating a distinct anthropologic base. Shortly thereafter, an explosion of literature was produced regarding organizational culture and its ideal management. Texts by Deal and Kennedy (1988), Ouchi (1981) and Peters and Waterman (1982), in particular, were responsible for the widespread popularity of this concept. These works, however, were prescriptive, solutions-based, largely atheoretical and non-academic. This

early writing was marketed to managers within a typical corporate structure and was designed to provide a quick fix and competitive edge.

Meanwhile, academia struggled to keep up with the commercial sector. The central issue behind an academic rise of interest in organizational culture was that "a hard 'scientific' management of institutions could and should be augmented with, or even displaced by, an approach that stressed a softer, more humane understanding of human values and culture" (Parker, 2000, p. 1). The organizational culture perspective was the "counter culture" of organizational theory, as it challenged much of the contemporary organizational behavior theory (Shafritz & Ott, 1987). Until this point, organization studies were dominated by a positivist paradigm. The introduction of anthropological epistemology propagated the notion that the organizational environment (specifically, culture) should be studied using qualitative methods.

During the 1980s, the conceptual base for organizational culture was developed further. As previously mentioned, there was much disagreement among scholars and disciplines regarding appropriate definition and assessment. The next sections provide a review of the prevailing themes and controversies surrounding the definition of organizational culture.

Prevailing Themes

Drawing from the traditions of three different disciplines, the definition of organizational culture is complicated by disagreements regarding what it should and should not include and the best to assessment method. Although many theorists in the 1980s advanced the conceptual understanding of organizational culture, a select group has dominated the majority of culture research **(Table 1)**. Further, it is widely accepted

that there is no singular, correct definition of culture. Van Maanen (1985) states, "The term 'culture' is powerfully evocative, but it does not come from anthropology as an intact structural package ready to serve as a paradigmatic foundation on which to build the analysis of organizations" (p. 57).

Through the continued work and conceptual development from such scholars as Edgar Schein, Mats Alvesson and Benjamin Schneider, some consistency of thought has arisen. This loose consensus of principles has guided much inquiry about organizational culture (Siehl & Martin, 1983; Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997).

1. Organizational culture exists.

Although it may seem simplistic, it took years of inquiry and theory to conclude that organizational culture exists. This debate is intimately related to the next tenet of culture.

2. Cultures are inherently fuzzy in that they incorporate contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities and confusion.

Throughout the development of organizational culture, it has been recognized that culture is not a "surface" phenomena. Rather, it is "infused with symbols and symbolism" (Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997, p. 69) and is "undetectable most of the time" (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). The lack of tangibility and potential for confusion and inconsistency lend to complex assessment of the concept. This thought paradigm is more involved than the positivist tradition of business research, thus necessitating greater conceptual development.

3. Organizational culture is socially constructed, the product of groups, not individuals, and based on shared experiences.

A core tenet regarding organizational culture is the group nature of the concept. Theorists have used this property to distinguish organizational culture from other, similar constructs, and to differentiate methods from previous work in organizational climate. Culture provides an organization's members with a framework for understanding and making sense of their work environment and
experiences (Siehl & Martin, 1983).

4. Each organization's culture is relatively unique, malleable and subject to continual change.

Central to this tenet was the debate over whether culture is something an organization has or something that an organization is. Originally, anthropological scholars relied on their disciplinary traditions and asserted that organizations were cultures in themselves (Rousseau, 1990). Further research, however, has led to relative consensus that culture is a property that the organization possesses. Further, since culture is a possession, there is the sense that it can be controlled, or at the very least influenced and changed, by its members. Culture, therefore, is developed over time and is not a static property. The assertion that culture is unique has led to some debate over how it is assessed. Generally, academic researchers believe that each organization's culture is distinct, although some instruments have demonstrated the ability to group separate cultures into broad categories. **The notion that culture was malleable was an attractive attribute to corporate managers.** Those that subscribed to this theory believed that molding organizational culture to an ideal form would thereby improve organizational output.

Several accepted definitions of organizational culture are used in the literature, a reflection of the epistemologic backgrounds or interests of the researcher. Most recent research on culture either cites Schein's (1987) definition or uses a derivation of his work. Schein's roots as a sociologist and his interests in the integration of new employees are apparent in his definition:

> Organizational culture is the pattern of basic assumptions which a given group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which 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 those problems…it is the assumptions which lie behind values and which determine the behavior patterns and the visible artifacts such as architecture, office layout, dress codes, and so on (1987, p. 383).

Controversies

Despite the growing consensus among researchers interested in organizational culture, there is also considerable disagreement. This does not necessarily mean that organizational culture is a weak or ill-defined concept. Rather, this divergence is indicative of **a continually developing** body of research (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). Several controversies surrounded the definition and operationalization of organizational culture. Therefore, this paper will limit discussion to the three most frequently cited.

Singular versus plural

Is there one, single culture per organization or are there several different cultures found within an organization? Early researchers of organizational culture, particularly

those from the anthropologic perspective, posited that in order to be defined as a unique culture, each organization possessed a singular, universal culture. More recent research, however, has revealed the presence of subcultures, also known as "nested" cultures (Parker, 2000). This is an important quality to consider when conceptualizing culture management or change. Additionally, recent cultural research has addressed the duality of perceived versus actual culture. More research is warranted to determine the implications of perceived and actual culture within an organization.

Consensus versus dissensus

In the same vein as the preceding controversy, a body of research on organizational culture has focused on the consistency of culture throughout an organization. This often places administrative perceptions in opposition to the lived experience of an organization's employees. Meyerson's (1991) research has focused on the framing of culture within three paradigms: Integration, ambiguity and fragmentation.

Meyerson asserts that it is appropriate, when characterizing an organization's culture, to classify it within the bounds of its actual implementation. Based on her qualitative study of hospital social workers, she states that an integrated culture is one that "shares common and clear understandings and identities" (p. 131). Fragmentation and ambiguity, in turn, account for differences in perceptions and experiences among organization members. Many researchers, in an attempt to account for these differences, have used Meyerson's classification when assessing culture.

There is considerable disagreement regarding this method of classification. Schein states:

> If there is no consensus or if there is conflict or if things are ambiguous, then, by

> definition, that group does not have a culture in regard to those things. It may have subcultures, smaller groups that have a shared … consensus about something, but the concept of sharing or consensus is core to the definition (1991, p. 248).

Meyerson (1991) later argues that ambiguities may be viewed as normal or abnormal within an organization's culture and that most cultural assessments consciously exclude ambiguities, since organizational researchers usually study objective and concrete phenomena.

Culture versus climate: The same or different?

Much research has been devoted to the differentiation of culture from climate. As culture was being developed into a separate field of inquiry in the early 1980s, a common justification for its study was its unique qualities, separate from organizational climate. Many articles, books and chapters have been written on this subject. Rather than present this debate in its entirety, this paper will attempt to highlight the major elements of this controversy.

In an early, simplistic attempt to delineate the two concepts, Schwartz & Davis (1981) stated, "Whatever culture is, it is not climate" (p. 32). This distinction, although not terribly sophisticated, formed the basis of much conceptual development in the 1980s. The disciplinary origins of climate and culture overlap, with both sharing common sociological threads. Climate research is grounded in Lewin's Gestalt psychology, whereas culture embodies references to anthropology (Schneider, 2000). Traditionally, climate has been measured with quantitative measurements and is often compared across

settings. Generally, climate is classified by its purpose (e.g., climate for service, climate for productivity).

The most accepted definition of climate is "the relatively enduring organizational environment that a) is experienced by the occupants, b) influences their behavior and c) can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics or attributes of the environment" (Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968, p. 25). This definition is quite similar to that of organizational culture. In fact, several researchers have propagated the idea that climate is a manifestation of culture (e.g., Schein, 1984; Reichers & Schneider, 1990; Hatch, 1993) and that the "inadequacies of one approach become the justification for the other" (Denison, 1996, p. 6).

During the emergence of culture as a distinct organizational quality, a central issue was differentiating it from organizational climate. As the culture construct was further developed, and methods for assessment were determined, these two areas approached convergence. Meyerson, in fact, retrospectively asserted that the development of culture "represented an ontological rebellion against the dominant functionalist or 'scientific' paradigm" (1991, p. 256). Is the distinction between climate and culture simply a divergence of methods or disciplines?

Recent research indicates that, while not exactly the same, culture and climate are not as different as originally conceptualized. Denison has written in-depth on this controversy. He begins a lengthy essay on this topic by stating:

> Although it is clear that culture and climate are, in fact, very different perspectives on organizational environments, it is far less clear that they actually examine distinct organizational phenomena…or whether they represent closely related phenomena that

are examined from different perspectives (1996, p. 3).

In fact, it is clear that both culture and climate attempt to address the interplay between individuals and their surroundings, but it becomes a circular debate to determine which produces and/or affects the other.

Denison (1996) noted that the development of culture wreaked havoc with climate researchers, introducing new methods and allowing for variation of assessment. Although many acknowledge that climate is a more superficial manifestation of culture, it is less clear if this overlap is indicative of different concepts or simply two aspects of the same construct. With the introduction of quantitative and mixed methods for study of organizational culture in the 1990s, this distinction became even more blurred. As the conceptualization and assessment of culture have advanced, it is increasingly apparent to many organizational researchers that the two concepts differ more in interpretation rather than within the phenomena themselves (Denison 1996).

Assessment Methods

Qualitative Approach

It can be concluded from the literature on organizational culture that most conceptualizations are of deep, intangible phenomena not easily objectified. For these reasons, and because culture was initially differentiated from climate by its anthropological influence, initial scholarly inquiry about culture employed qualitative methods. Early studies of organizational culture largely used ethnography or participant observation to describe cultures, one institution at a time (Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997). The development of cultural study, as distinct from climate study, used the applicability of qualitative methods as justification for differentiation. Additionally, early

researchers believed that standardized, quantitative instruments were inappropriate for cultural assessment because they would be unable to capture the subjective and unique aspects of each culture. Opponents of a strictly qualitative approach, however, asserted that comparison between cultures is not possible using this technique.

Quantitative Tools

Frustration with the limited generalizability and time intensiveness of qualitative methods led to the development of quantitative tools to assess culture. Rousseau (1990) advocates for quantitative instruments, stating that cultural assessment would benefit in strength and validity from the testing of psychometric properties in these instruments. In order to support quantitative methods, however, the underlying conception of culture must be that it is something an organization *possesses*, rather than *embodies*, contradictory to some anthropological theory.

Cameron & Quinn (1999) argue that it is crucial, if using quantitative instruments, that these be validated to ensure the reporting of underlying values and assumptions, rather than climate. Further, many theorists argue that questionnaires or survey instruments are inappropriate for measuring culture in that they "measure the dimensions of culture determined in advance by the researcher, thus potentially missing or distorting the actual dimensions of cultures existing a priori in the organization itself" (Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997, p. 72). Taken together, the weaknesses of using qualitative or quantitative methods alone leave potential for omission of crucial elements of culture.

Mixed Methods

In 1983, Siehl and Martin attempted to bridge this gap by using mixed methods. Since then, mixed methods have emerged as the preferred method for assessing

organizational culture. Most recent studies involve some combination of participant observation, interview, focus group, survey and/or questionnaire. It is believed that mixed methods allow the most explanation of error variance, greater depth in elaboration of culture as a construct (Alvesson & Berg, 1992) and more opportunity for data analysis (Fleeger, 1993). A great deal of writing has been devoted to promoting and employing mixed methods (Siehl & Martin, 1990; Rousseau, 1990; Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Smith, Francovich, & Gieselman, 2000; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Fleeger, 1993; Goodridge & Hack, 1996; Siehl & Martin, 1983).

Assessment Tools

As the assessment of organizational culture evolved and quantitative methods gained popularity and acceptance, various questionnaires and surveys were developed. It is important to note that some of these tools were developed in order to be marketed to managers and were therefore not subject to theoretical development by academic researchers. Discussion in this paper will be limited to those tools developed by trained researchers.

Unfortunately, most tools assessing organizational culture were never subjected to psychometric evaluation. It is recognized that there is no ideal instrument as each tool has limitations for use or scope (Scott, Mannion, Davies, & Marshall, 2003). That being said, the two most cited and scientifically rigorous instruments are the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI; Cameron & Quinn, 1999) and the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI; Cooke & Lafferty, 1986).

Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI)

The OCAI uses ipsative scoring scales to categorize organizational culture. In ipsative scoring, respondents assign points to their answers and all answers must sum to a predetermined total. The OCAI is based upon the Competing Values Framework, originally conceptualized by Campbell in 1974. Derived from this framework, the OCAI has undergone several revisions and, through factor analysis, has a well developed classification system. Quinn refined Campbell's work in 1983 to create four organizational "types": Clan, Adhocracy, Hierarchy and Market. Ultimately, these types became the basis for the OCAI. Cameron and Quinn (1999) emphasize that there is no one "correct" typology for an organization. The OCAI assesses the degree of each type represented in an organization and presents an individualized assessment of appropriateness of that typology, given the organization's goals.

The OCAI was deliberately designed to be simple, so as to facilitate maximum participation at all levels of an organization. Additionally, it contains generalized questions, in order to appeal to many different kinds of organizations. The OCAI, or versions of it also based on the Competing Values Framework, have been used in several studies of organizational culture (e. g., Denison, 1990; Cameron & Freeman, 1991; Jones, DeBaca, & Yarbrough, 1997). Its reliability and validity were established in a series of studies (Quinn & Spreitzer 1991; Yeung, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 1991; Zammuto & Krakower, 1991).

Critics of the OCAI maintain that it does not precisely measure culture, instead "pigeon holing" organizations into a priori diagnostic categories created by researchers (Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997). Strict qualitative methodologists object on the grounds that this does not reveal the unique aspects of an organization's culture, instead

lumping results into generic categories. Cameron and Quinn, however, readily admit that the OCAI is intended to be both diagnostic and prescriptive in function. Further, ipsative scoring inherently creates a situation where respondents' answers are dependent upon each other, since they must sum to a pre-determined total. This can obscure the interpretation and clarity of results. Proponents of the OCAI point to its ease in implementation and its low cost.

Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI)

Similarly, the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI; Cooke & Lafferty, 1986) classifies organizations into three general types of cultures: Constructive, Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive. Additionally, it evaluates twelve sets of behavioral norms within an organization. The OCI has been used for many purposes and is the most widely used industry tool for assessing organizational culture, completed by over 2 million respondents worldwide as of the year 2000 (Cooke & Szumal, 2000). Since this tool has been used so widely, a large information base exists on the behavior of cultures.

The conceptual framework for the OCI was developed by Cooke and colleagues and is based upon distinguishing between an organization's concern for people versus its concern for task. The OCI tool is built upon the Human Synergistics circumplex conceptual framework, derived via factor analysis from many cultural studies. Sub-constructs of the OCI have been empirically supported and validated by numerous sources (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; Cooke & Szumal, 1993; Xenikou & Furnham, 1996). Similar to the OCAI, organizations are typed and classified into three predetermined categories based on the degree of strength to which they represent each category. In

addition to assessing the current culture of an organization, the OCI has the capacity to determine the *ideal* culture for an organization, allowing for comparison between actual and ideal cultures. This feature has led to the use of the OCI as the basis for planning culture change.

A quantitative instrument with similar predetermined categories, the OCI shares the same criticisms as the OCAI. Additionally, it is not as user-friendly and simple as the OCAI. The OCI is a lengthier survey and is subject to proprietary analysis, eliminating the possibility of internal organizational evaluation. Its widespread use and extensive psychometric testing make it an attractive option for researchers. Cooke and Szumal (2000) list more international testing (Asia, Africa, Latin America) as a next step in the development of the OCI.

Applicability to Health Care

Most work on organizational culture concerns the traditional corporation. Therefore, some adaptation to the central goals and focus of a human services organization are necessary before application to a health care setting. Although not always explicit, it appears that Schein's conceptual work and theory have most influenced the study of organizational culture in health care. Schein is frequently cited as the conceptual reference for this inquiry. Sovie (1993) emphasizes that health care organizations should be particularly concerned with organizational culture because "the shared beliefs, values, and feelings that exist within an institution direct the perception of and the approach to the work that is to be done" (p. 72).

Two teams of researchers (Gershon, Stone, Bakken, & Larson, 2004; Scott, Mannion, Davies & Marshall, 2003) have completed in-depth searches and evaluated

tools used to measure organizational culture in the health care setting. Both teams reviewed biomedical literature via online databases and consulted with experts in the behavioral research field. Although most instruments were developed and published in the mid-1980s, Gershon and colleagues (2004) found that their application to health care was largely limited to the previous five years. Additionally, most studies were completed in hospitals and targeted nurses in their evaluations. They surmise that this could be in response to a 1999 Institute of Medicine report, *To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health Care System,* which advocated culture change in order to decrease medical error rates.

Gershon and colleagues also found, predictably, that terminology differed across instruments. Potentially, this contributes to the further confounding of assessment of organizational culture. Reflecting frustration with the inconsistency of terms, the team stated:

> If aspects of the organizational culture are ill-defined, frequently shifting, poorly communicated, not reinforced, and/or poorly supported administratively, both the employees' collective perceptions *and their behaviors* (i.e., delivery of care, safe work practices, and teamwork) will be inconsistent (2004, p. 37, emphasis in original).

Gershon and team conclude, on the basis of reliability and validity, that the Organizational Culture Inventory (Cooke & Lafferty, 1986) is most appropriate for use in the health care setting.

A year previous to Gershon's article, Scott and colleagues (2003) performed a similar analysis of organizational culture instruments in health care. **They** identified thirteen tools designed specifically to measure culture only (without reference to climate).

Nine of these thirteen were used in studies of health care environments. Schein's conceptualization of organizational culture was used when analyzing each tool, only quantitative measures were evaluated.

Rather than choosing one "best" instrument for cultural assessment, the team concluded that "the choice of instrument should be determined by how organizational culture is conceptualized by the research team, the purpose of the investigation, intended use of the results and availability of resources" (Scott, **Mannion, Davies, & Marshall**, 2003, p. 923). In this way, the team's recommendations are appropriate to a wider set of applications for cultural assessment. Overall, however, Scott and colleagues devote a large portion of their concluding thoughts to advocating mixed methods. Citing their earlier work, Scott's team deemed it appropriate to study surface manifestations of culture with quantitative methods and follow up with assessment of underlying assumptions with qualitative techniques. The team then provides examples of studies using mixed methods in different order (e.g., Qual-quant, Quant-qual). They determined that either order could be appropriate, depending on the goals of the study.

Conclusion

After 25 years of development, the construct of organizational culture has finally reached some consensus. Although research does not universally subscribe to one definition of organizational culture, there is relative agreement on major elements of its definition. Organizational culture exists. It can be ambiguous, but it is unique to each institution and malleable. Organizational culture is socially constructed, arising from group interactions.

As the construct has developed, so have methods for assessing it. Beginning with the assertion that organizational culture can be evaluated using qualitative techniques, researchers have moved on to consider broader methods. Quantitative measurement tools have been developed and psychometrically tested, and, most recently, mixed methods have been employed to provide a richer assessment of organizational culture. Although most of the conceptual and measurement work regarding organizational culture has been based upon the traditional corporate structure, research has shown that it is adaptable to the health care sector. The recognition and assessment of organizational culture is particularly valuable in health care, as it addresses the therapeutic milieu, thereby creating the potential to maximize service, quality and outcomes for both health care providers and recipients of care.

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