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ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS: RENEWED FAD OR ENDURING HEURISTIC?

The idea of organizations as cultures captured the imagination of business managers and educators alike in the 1980s, only to be quickly forgotten and replaced by a new interest in Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Reengineering (BPR), and, more recently Sigma Six. Lately there has been renewed interest in organizational culture among business educators (Aaltio-Marjosola & Mills, 2002 (in Press); Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000) and practitioners (Lee Marks, 1999). Is this a renewed fashion (Abrahamson, 1996) or is organizational culture an invaluable tool for organizational problem solving? This paper reviews the debate and draws implications for the utility of an organizational culture perspective for studying organizational problems. We conclude that organizational culture can be invaluable as a diagnostic tool if it is utilized as a sense-making device.

Introduction

This paper reviews the organizational culture debate and draws implications for the utility of an organizational culture perspective for studying organizational problems. Popular interest in organizational culture dates back to the late 1970s. This was a period of time marked by a power shift in international markets as U.S. large business performance was declining and Japan was becoming an international market leader. In addition, a shift in priorities of funding agencies (i.e. away from climate research) and the changing role of psychology and business schools meant both academics and practitioners were searching for new ways of understanding organizational change (Pettigrew, 2000).

A number of American researchers at the time, including Peters and Waterman(1982) and Deal and Kennedy(1982), perceived a need to promote the cultural values of successful US firms. This heavily publicized version of 'corporate culturalism' (Willmott, 1993) has been criticized for advocating "ideological manipulation and control [...] as an essential management strategy" (Morgan, 1996: 138). This, in part, may have led to its demise as results were piecemeal and employers, in the grip of an imperative of change (Helms Mills, 2000), looked for new solutions in other programmatic approaches, including Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) and, more recently, Sigma Six . Since the onset of the 1980s change has become a conventional management practice, developed and sustained or cued by media, business educators, and consultants (Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000; Helms Mills, 2000). This need for a 'quick fix' has monopolized that which is deemed popular in practice (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). As a result, in many cases the cultural research that has been readily accepted in academia and practice has been 'surface' level attempts to solve organizational problems, and can be more accurately classified as climate research (Ashkanasy, et al., 2000; Denison, 1996).

Recently, the organizational culture perspective has once again become popularized due to economic conditions. First, employers need to attract talented people and employees want to find increased meaning in their work. The U.S. and Canadian economies are soaring, turning employee recruitment and retention into major challenges. Organizations must search continually for innovative approaches to identify, attract and keep talented people. One way they are doing this is by focusing on their culture, an intangible but valuable resource (Palich, 1999). Firms are now adopting culture change and even culture creation initiatives.

Second, there has been a dramatic increase in mergers and acquisitions (statistical data in Mergers & Acquisitions, 2000). A number of the more publicized merger or "takeover" failures were perceived to be caused by organizational culture differences between companies. So, as organizations merge, assimilating two or more cultures has become a critical success factor in the performance of the new entity (Lee Marks, 1999).

Nonetheless, managers and researchers must be cautious with the renewed popularity of the organizational culture perspective. There are still many unresolved issues. The diverse nature of organizational culture research has been plagued by definitional, theoretical and methodological debates (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001; Martin, 1992; Smircich, 1983). Although culture research can provide a more holistic view of organizational problems, it is only through an integrative attempt to analyse culture and organizations from the diverse approaches will it serve as a useful tool for understanding organizational problems (Martin, 1992). In retracing the path of scholarly research on the subject we argue that it is problematic to view organizational culture as a programmatic method of problem solving. This would imply a pre-existing ordered sense of reality and a 'better' way of organizing. We conclude that an organizational culture *lens* is useful in understanding the intricacies of organizational life. It should be viewed as a sensemaking device (Weick, 1995), diagnostic in nature rather than problem solving.

Current Debates and Issues

The field of organizational culture research, largely due the amorphous nature of the concept combined with the alternative conceptual viewpoints of many researchers, is a controversial and contentious one. There are seven issues and questions that will be addressed in this paper:

- (1) What are the difficulties in defining and conceptualizing culture?
- (2) What is best method of study: qualitative, quantitative or multi-method?
- (3) Is organizational climate really distinct from organizational culture?
- (4) Are today's organizational cultures best described as monolithic or fragmented?
- (5) How are organizational design and organizational culture related?
- (6) Should cultures be seen as distinct types, or described at the idiographic level?
- (7) How is organizational culture related to performance?

(1) Defining and conceptualizing organizational culture

Organizational culture has generated significant research interest within a variety of diverse academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, management science and psychology (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, Peterson, 2000). The construct, despite this range of research interest, has proved challenging to operationalize. Schneider (1987) noted that "culture is an...amorphous topic...and like Jello, it seems difficult to nail to the wall." Schein (1990) concurs that "there is presently little agreement on what the concept does and should mean, how it should be observed and measured, how it relates to more traditional industrial and organizational theories, and how it should be used in our efforts to help organizations." Echoing this view, Martin and Frost (1996), in their critique "Organizational Culture War Games: The Struggle for Intellectual Dominance", relate the inherently confrontational field of published culture research to a series of war games between researchers adopting alternative theoretical and pragmatic viewpoints.

There is very little consensus on the definition of culture. Different definitions represent differences in ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies of culture researchers (Ashkanasy, et al., 2000; Martin & Frost, 1996; Ott, 1989; Smircich, 1983). Therefore, in reviewing the literature and determining the contribution to the area of research, it essential to first determine how a researcher is defining culture. Martin (1992) claims however, that there are times that researchers define culture as one thing and study another. This restricts or slows the maturation of the organizational culture framework as a useful and generally accepted tool for organizational analysis. Martin (1992: 4) goes on to say that organizational culture researchers disagree about fundamental issues including: (i) Is culture a source of harmony, an effect of irreducible conflicts of interest, or a reflection of the inescapable ambiguities that pervade contemporary organizational life? (ii) Must culture be something internally consistent, integrative, and shared? Or can it be inconsistent and expressive of difference? Or can it incorporate confusion,

ignorance, paradox, and fragmentation? (iii) What are the boundaries around culture (s) in organizations? Are boundaries essential? (iv) How do cultures change?

Ott (1989) claims that culture research and researchers needed to go through developmental steps before it achieved maturity. However, a decade later the same debates continue about definitional, theoretical, and methodological issues of organizational culture research. For example, Denison (1996) claims that attempts by researchers to meld methodological issues by combining both quantitative and qualitative methods produce a lack of legitimacy from peers that clearly differ in ontological and epistemological fronts. In addition, in Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson's (2000) *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, they claim no consensus on what culture is and how it should be studied. Rather, they present a history of culture research from its origins to present day by organizational culture and climate researchers, with research that is as diverse in ontology, epistemology and methodology as the 164 definitions listed by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) fifty years ago. Perhaps Ott (1989: 50-51) said it best, that culture is a concept which is largely determined by how one looks at it:

The first step to understanding the essence of organizational culture is to appreciate that it is a concept rather than a thing...A thing can be discovered and truths established about it, for example, through empirical research. Unlike a thing, however, a concept is created in people's minds – that is, it must be conjured up, defined, and refined. Thus ultimate truths about organizational culture cannot be found or discovered. There is no final authoritative source or experiment to settle disagreements about what it is or what comprises it.

Perspectives on organizational culture: Martin & Frost (1996) argue that these differences in opinions of researchers within a discipline is not so uncommon, however, what is uncommon is that these differences have been openly argued in the cultural literature. Typically, such critiques are handled in blind reviews. Typologies or classification of culture studies have been offered by Smircich (1983), Martin (1992), Denison (1996), Martin & Frost (1996), among a variety of other researchers. Central to these classifications are differences in ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies.

Many researchers claim that work in organizational theory can be characterized by a range of assumptions about the ontological status of social reality – the objective / subjective question (Smircich, 1983). In regards to the culture research, ontological perspectives can be categorized into three kinds including, structural realist; social construction, and; linguistic conveniences (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001). The structural realist is the most common and it views organizations as structures that have a variety of properties, including climate and culture. The social construction ontology places emphasis on the varying regularities in events that happen and gives observers room to select which sets of events to group together into a culture. "An organization, in this view, constitutes a culture" (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001). Whereas, linguistic conveniences view organizations and culture as mechanisms to serve the heuristic purpose of assisting us in thinking. Structures and processes are interpreted or not, according to how helpful they are deemed by a particular person (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001).

Culture research can also be classified according to three epistemologies including, deductive; inductive, and; radical approaches (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001). The deductive approaches emphasize broadly applicable cultural dimensions and researchers gain knowledge by constructing these dimensions, looking to see where organizations fall on them, and then revising the dimensions when phenomena are overlooked (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001). Inductive approaches come to some conclusions about cultural dimensions by deriving categories by directly observing particular organizations. These approaches tend to recognize the presence of explicit, as well as, tacit elements that define specified constructs (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001). Radical approaches view observers as more interested in producing constructions that mirror their own interest as opposed to reflecting accuracy (Morgan, 1996).

The methods used to study culture range from quantitative collection through the administration of surveys to reflect generalized concepts to qualitative collection through interviews, focus groups, observation and participation (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001; Martin, 1992; Martin & Frost, 1996; Ott, 1989). Stemming from the methodological debates are arguments of reliability, validity and

researcher objectivity of the various methods (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001; Martin, 1992; Martin & Frost, 1996; Ott, 1989).

Although cultural researchers use a variety of ontological, epistemological and methodological combinations, some combinations are more inherently compatible than others (i.e. structural realist, deductive and quantitative) (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001; Martin, 1992). Some would argue that the type of research quite often dictates the ontological and epistemological views, and even the methodologies in some cases. For example, most of the climate research (artifacts) use a structural realist ontology and deductive epistemology, based on survey methods (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001).

Much of the first widely recognized cultural research was managerially-oriented and defined culture “as an internally consistent package of cultural manifestations that generates organization-wide consensus...” (Martin & Frost, 1996). This research emphasized shared values, characterized by consistency, organization-wide consensus and clarity and quite often it portrayed leaders as culture creators and transformers (Martin, 1992). Martin (1992) termed this cultural research ‘integration’ research. Integration researchers coined organization culture as a unifying corporate concept with little mention of the subculture presence in organizations. Sub-cultural existence was acknowledged by another group of culture researchers that Martin (1992) termed ‘differentiation’ researchers. These researchers recognize a sharing of values, however, this commonality exists in only subcultures. It presents subculture analysis in dichotomies (i.e. occupational groupings), countercultures or demographics (Martin, 1992). The third perspective of culture research is not characterized by a universality, rather it claims the manifestations of culture are ambiguous, complex, and contradicting (Martin, 1992). The perspectives differ on several criteria including, orientation to consensus, relation among manifestations, orientation to ambiguity and metaphors.

Common to all three perspectives, integration, differentiation, and fragmentation, is an objectivist ontology. Each view offers a ‘correct’ interpretation of how culture occurred and what cultural members reported. With the fragmentation perspective, some of the sampling limitations of the other perspectives are overcome with systematic, relatively comprehensive, and fully developed sampling. However, these studies tend to seek evidence where they are most likely to find it (Levitt & Nass, 1989; Meyerson, 1991).

Researchers within the fragmentation perspective do not claim that there is a direct link between culture and effectiveness, to do so would imply control. There are some that stress the benefits not through control rather in a manner to capitalize on its potential advantages, while others stress to claim that there is a link between such ambiguity and performance would be an exercise in futility (Martin, 1992; Martin & Frost, 1996). Recommendations for cultural change are minimal, in fact some critics would claim idealistic in that it implies that society can be changed by changing the perceptions of individuals (Martin, 1992). Large scale cultural change stems from small scale individual change.

The Postmodern Alternative: Most modern accounts of organization culture, including integration, differentiation and fragmentation studies, attempts to provide order to disorder in organizational life (Martin & Frost, 1996). Each implies that one is better than the other in some way, closer to the truth about culture. Counter to this view is the postmodern approach in which reality is series of fictions and illusions (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Geertz, 1988). This deconstruction can provide insight into the culture research and challenge its shortcomings as a holistic framework of analysis. In the view of Martin & Frost (1996), the goal here is ‘not to establish a better theory of culture, but rather to challenge the foundations of modern cultural scholarship.

(2) Methodology: Qualitative, Quantitative or Multi-method?

Potentially the most significant difference in practical and theoretical approaches adopted by researchers is that of qualitative versus quantitative methodology, and respective underlying theory. Qualitative cultural researchers argue against what they perceive as the inherently reductionist perspective of quantitative research, suggesting that psychometric techniques employed in such studies are fundamentally at odds with the nebulous and implicit nature of the construct (Alvesson, 1989; Broms & Gahrnberg, 1983; Martin & Seihl, 1983; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Pettigrew, 1979; Rentsch, 1990). On the other hand, quantitative researchers regard culture measurement as crucial to understanding relationships between factors of interest,

arguing that in order to generalize findings across organizations, comparable measures must be developed to allow valid investigation of cultural differences and their relative impact on other organizational factors (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990; Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; Cooke & Szumal, 1993; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Xenikou & Furnham, 1996; Zamanou & Glaser, 1994).

(3) Climate and Culture

Arguably, much of the quantitative research concentrated on climate studies. Organizational climate research preceded interest in organizational culture. Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) defined climate as the attitudes, feelings and social processes that occurred in social settings. Throughout the 1950s until the late 1970s and early 1980s quite a lot of this research, stemming from the psychology discipline, was carried out at University of Michigan within the Institute for Social Research (ISR) (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). Interestingly, as the role of psychology departments versus business schools changed and the priorities of funding agencies (i.e. Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation) shifted upon which climate researchers at the ISR depended, a surge in culture was starting (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001).

The use of surveys to represent climate was the dominant way in which we in organizational studies through the 1960s and 1970s provided an overall sense of the social processes within organizations. Reichers and Schneider (1990) note that by the early 1980s, a combination of forces redirected the attention of scholars and organizational change consultants to organizational culture as an alternative way of looking at overall organizational functioning. (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000)

In sum, the failing performance levels of the U.S. and Japan's command of international markets directed attention to culture to explain and identify solutions for American businesses. This, coupled with the growing discontentment with mainstream organizational theory as a tool for organizational analysis and problem solving, redirection of climate research funding, and the changing role of psychology versus business schools, paved the way for organizational culture as a holistic approach to analysing organizations and improving organizational effectiveness (Martin & Frost, 1996; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001).

This surge in interest in organizational culture however, did not appear to be as long lasting in practice. Despite the marketing of organizational culture as the ideal solution to practitioners, culture change could not be attained as a 'quick fix' solution. Aspects of the climate (i.e. artifacts) could be 'fixed', however, this was only skimming the surface of the culture phenomena. The late 1980s and onward into the 1990s has been marked by a number of 'quick fix' programs promoted by media and consultants as solutions to the organizational efficiency problems (i.e. TQM, BPR)(Carson, et al., 2000; Helms Mills, 2000; Martin & Frost, 1996). Many executives, consultants, and lower-level employees dismiss culture as 'yesterday's fad', and predictably have turned elsewhere to find another 'quick fix' for corporate ills. (Martin & Frost, 1996: p. 608). First, practitioners tend to oversimplify the meaning of organizational culture as they borrow, adapt, or are fed the latest theory of organizational culture. This produces a high probability of failed adaptation of culture to organizational issues, especially those related to improving productivity and performance. (Martin & Frost, 1996: p. 614)

Some researchers imply that the late 1990s have seen a renewed interest in organizational culture research (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2001). Denison (1996) would argue that we are seeing a shift back towards climate research, in disguise as culture. Yet, some researchers have argued that the concepts of organizational climate and culture have many similarities and yet distinct differences (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997; Rentsch, 1990). Most agree that, at least at the conceptual level, climate and culture are distinct (if complimentary) constructs. However, at the empirical level, particularly when researchers have approached the study of culture using quantitative, survey-based methods, relatively few substantial differences exist in the nature of survey items or dimensions.

Cooke and Rousseau (1988) propose that: "Climate, rather than culture, reflects perceptions of organizational structures and how it *feels* to be a member of the organization. In contrast, beliefs regarding how to *behave* are aspects of culture." Buono et al (1985) concur, "...while culture is concerned with the *nature* of beliefs and expectations about organizational life, climate is an indicator of *whether* those beliefs and expectations are being *fulfilled*." Schneider (1987) offers the most "cut and dry" explanation: "Obviously climate and culture are complimentary topics. Climate focuses on how the organization

functions (what it rewards, supports, and expects), while culture addresses the assumptions and values attributed to why particular activities and behaviours are rewarded, supported and expected. Culture, then, focuses on why things happen as they do, on the meaning or reasons for what happens."

(4) Monolithic or Fragmented Cultures?

Another major area of contention within the culture literature concerns the homogeneity or heterogeneity of an organization's culture. Many management specialists have attempted to develop taxonomic systems that allow organisations to be categorized according to their predominant features. With regard to homogeneity of culture, however, it is important to recognize that such taxonomic approaches make an important assumption: namely that each organization may be classified *as a whole*, regardless of the many sub-components which may exist within it. Rapid formation/disbanding project teams and an increased focus on project-based work are representative of today's fast-changing workplace. Not only may cultures differ between organizational groups and sub-units, but they may be continuously shifting, as projects are completed and new groups formed. In addition, most organizations, despite efforts to multi-skill and integrate staff, retain an internal structure which may be based on informal social relationships, commonality of position, task, or role or even physical proximity.

Such, formal or informal groupings may develop their own specific sub-cultural units which may even be in conflict with the dominant organizational culture. Evidence for this was reported by Sackmann (1992), who, using interview techniques, found distinct sub-cultural groupings within a single organization, differentiated on the basis of shared knowledge and communication.

(5) Organizational structure and design

The relationship between an organization's culture and its structure is widely debated within management research. From a review of the scholarly literature, it can be inferred that two levels of analysis comprise an organization's culture – relating to 1) the individual/group and 2) to the organizational or structural level of culture (Martin, 1995). At the structural level, a variety of organizational factors are fundamental to the creation and retention of an organization's culture. The *mission or vision* is the broadest definition of the reason the organization exists. It provides an overall yardstick against which all organizational activity can be judged for consistent contribution to a single purpose. *Policies* are broad statements designed to be guides to behavioural decisions within the organization. Policies tend to be written in such a way as to provide considerable margin in interpretation and specific implementation. *Procedures* are designed to provide more specific guidance to behaviour decisions. *Rules* are specific definitions of acceptable behaviour.

One method of explaining the theoretical underpinnings of structures is by categorizing designs. Yet, it is really the attempt to create typologies that has stimulated the debate over structure. There is actually consensus on the types and categories themselves. The debated issue is whether this type of analysis is useful in solving organizational problems.

(6) Typologies of organizational design

As mentioned above, many researchers have attempted to classify organizations into structural forms in an effort to link various types of organizational design with components of the organization's culture. There are advantages and disadvantages (see figure 1).

Thus, classification of organisational types, linking structures and designs with cultural values, while intuitively appealing, must be treated with caution. Deal & Kennedy (1982), Graves (1986), Handy,(1978) and Harrison(1972) have all produced interesting accounts of culture types, with appealing descriptions of the types of behaviour associated with each. However, as noted by Furnham & Gunter (1993), these cultural systems have proved little more than interpretive intuitions which have yet to be validated.

Figure 1 : Advantages and disadvantages of typologies

Advantages	Disadvantages
Can compare and contrast cultures in order to predict and control areas of misunderstanding/friction before they occur	Classification systems are only as good as the evidence upon which they are based, and this is frequently poor
Empirical data from groups, clusters or types may yield counter-intuitive findings that simple guesswork would not show	Different statistical techniques yield different dimensions and it is not certain which are most useful
Theories of classification can be tested by gathering empirical data. In this sense, they can be discarded, revised or supported	Very 'broad brush' classification systems can be insensitive, omitting important dimensions
Simple 'typing' helps people become aware of their own culture and how it differs from others, making more immediate and accessible a complex and elusive concept	Classifying culture does not explain the consequences of differences or similarities, or what to do about them

(7) Culture and performance

As has been discussed, much effort has been expended in attempting to frame organizational culture in terms of 'cultural types' when considering performance in the marketplace. Specific companies are held up as prime examples of 'successful' and 'high-achieving' organizational cultures (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). This apparently straightforward relationship was questioned by Ernest (Ernest, 1985) (1985), who stated that "effective business planning...requires an understanding of not only the external competitive environment but also the internal corporate culture. There must be a 'fit' between planning and the beliefs, values and practices within the organization." He argued that there is no single cultural 'type' which leads to success, but that organizational plans are often ineffective because of the incompatibility of those plans with organizational culture(s).

The research literature acknowledges that the link between a company's culture and its success or failure in a given market is not a simple one (Marcoulides & Heck, 1993). The precise links proposed depend heavily on how the concept is operationalized and studied (Schein, 1990). It has been argued that culture can be examined both from an organizational (Marcoulides and Heck, 1993) and from an individual (Chatman, 1991) perspective, that perceptions of culture differ according to levels in the organizational hierarchy (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988), and that the presence of influential sub-units within an organization with their own cultures, may have either an inhibitory or enhancing influence on performance (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988). Detailed study of the link between culture and performance factors is thus complicated by other factors (e.g. cultural heterogeneity), many of which have yet to be fully explained and accounted for in the literature.

Culture as a Framework for Analysing Organizational Problems

The seriousness of these intellectual differences make it difficult to review the results of research in this area, for there is chaos rather than order, conflict rather than consensus, and little sense of a cumulative building of what would be generally recognized as advances in knowledge. (Martin & Frost, 1996: p. 599-600)

The above quotation from Martin and Frost (1996) illustrates the complexity in evaluating culture research as a framework. It makes it difficult to frame the subject into a well-ordered life cycle marked by introduction, development and maturation stages. Then, does culture research have value as a framework for analysing organizational problems? Just as how culture is defined depends on the researcher, the value of culture as a framework depends on the audience and the purpose - "useful for whom and for what purpose?" (Smircich, 1983).

As a tool for understanding organizational problems, we contend that a subjectivist, multi-perspective approach will provide insight not available from a single perspective. It would provide a means for understanding the present organization through a historical account of its life course. As a tool for

creating change, we are less convinced. If change is the goal, we would side with some of the fragmentation research and conclude that self-enlightenment may facilitate change by shifting modes of thinking. Through the identification of themes, this enlightenment can provide new lenses from which to view the world, rather than culture creating radical change or providing solutions to organization problems. This way of viewing the culture research parallels Morgan's (1996) metaphor of organizations as psychic prisons. Organizations are created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes, with the notion that people become imprisoned or confined by the images and ideas to which these processes give rise (Morgan, 1996). By understanding or attempting to understand the complexities, ambiguities – what is presence and what is not, we can gain some personal insight into the culture of a particular organization. Whether or not, this in turn will produce organizational-wide change, we can offer little insight.

To assume that such cultural change is attainable would imply that there is a better way to organize or a universal truth. Most of the cultural research, in particular the integration and differentiation perspectives, are problematic in nature. This search for unity defines culture as a stabilizer, a conservative force, and a way of making things predictable (Schein, 1992). We feel that Smircich (1983) was optimistic in her view that the cultural framework was a useful tool as a means to encourage “us to see that an important role for both those who study and manage organizations is not to celebrate organization as a value, but to question the ends it serves” (p. 355). The postmodern perspective offers valuable insight into this debate through its challenging of our search for truths. In supporting this line of analysis, we would argue that culture research as framework for understanding organizational problems would be of little value to practitioners without entailing some sort of manipulation of organizational members. This is evident in the change movement that has become institutionalized in organizational practice (Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000; Helms Mills, 2000).

Culture research has been marked by endless definitional, theoretical, and methodological debates. Unfortunately, this has likely led to confusion by practitioners and a justification for the lack of legitimacy of the research by academics. Although qualitative research is invaluable and essential in organizational culture analysis, it is still marked by constant criticism of validity and reliability (Martin & Frost, 1996). Despite the constant flow of culture research in academia, the maturation of culture research has been limited due to ongoing debates.

Martin (1992) presented a holistic framework for using culture as a tool in understanding organizational problems. The biggest limitation of the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation is the search or implication for a ‘correct’ way of viewing culture – this search for answers is problematic. The deconstruction of culture offered by postmodernism is insightful through its challenging of the shortcomings of culture research as a holistic framework of analysis. We conclude that value of a cultural framework is bounded by the audience and the purpose – in the end, it is a diagnostic rather than a problem-solving tool. Not treated as a ‘thing’ of change but as a sensemaking tool may ultimately be of value to practitioners. An understanding of ongoing organizational sensemaking, the impact of shocks on that sensemaking and the creation of plausible understandings of events may, in the long run, prove a more valuable tool for handling change (Helms-Mills, 2000).

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