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# The Historical and Philosophical Understandings of Organizational Culture

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study sought to discuss definitions of organizational culture taking into consideration different views, and the historical and philosophical elements of organizational culture.

**Research Design, Data, and Methodology** – This paper is a relatively conceptual study that has attempted to define organizational culture, a topic that has been debated among scholars and practitioners. Various studies in the literature related to organizational culture have been reviewed in an effort to reduce the complexities and ambiguities in definitions of organizational culture.

**Results** – This study summarized and synthesized different studies related to organizational culture, and identified the main streams for defining organizational culture as being from the historical and philosophical elements of organizational culture.

**Conclusions** – The concept of organizational culture continues to be an important factor affecting organizational effectiveness and initiating organizational development. However, the definition of organizational culture has not been well-established. In this sense, this paper seems to be significant and meaningful as it attempts to define organizational culture from different perspectives.

**Keywords** : Organizational Culture, History of Organizational Culture, Philosophical Elements of Organizational Culture.

**JEL Classifications** : L20, L25, M10, M14.

## 1. Introduction

Since the global financial crisis in late 1990s and 2000s, the topic of organizational culture has been gaining increased attention. A number of private companies, organizations, and government agencies have focused on culture change inter-

ventions, and researchers and practitioners have also broadened the scope of their work and advanced the agenda in the field of human resource development and human resource management. This increasing interest in organizational culture has promoted the widespread belief that organizational culture can align solutions with new business or organizational strategies as well as enhance employee performance. Cummings & Worley (2001) suggest that the interest in organizational culture "derives largely from its presumed impact on organization effectiveness"(p. 503). Hence, HR (human resource) professionals in their workplaces as a culture change agent are in key positions to design, diagnose, facilitate, coordinate, and monitor culture change interventions within their organizations.

Although a significant amount of research on organizational culture has been conducted by researchers from diverse backgrounds such as anthropology, business administration, public administration, organizational studies, human resource and organizational development, and education, cultural studies in organizational contexts are still young and in the process of being debated. Moreover, while most research focuses on immediate practical applications for HR professionals, there has been less attention paid to the historical contexts and philosophical beliefs and assumptions underlying organizational culture. Understanding how organizational culture has developed and what beliefs and assumptions lie beneath it is critical, because it gives HR practitioners and researchers ways to think about their practice and research, to grasp the reasons for the way they behave, and to enhance conceptual clarity on their everyday activities (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss the historical and philosophical underpinnings of organizational culture. After an opening discussion of definitions of organizational culture with different views, it examines the history of organizational culture. This article also discusses the philosophical elements of organizational culture.

This study could not only provide important implications for HR practitioners and researchers specifically, but also send important messages for all functions of organization because decent organizational culture could promote good marketing strategies, as namely, comparative marketing management, contingency marketing management, marketing cognition, marketing symbolism, and structural/psychodynamic perspective in marketing (Deshpande & Webster, 1989). Therefore, the defining organizational culture historically and theoretically should be prior to applying the guidelines to the marketing paradigms.

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Since researches and related literature were reviewed to articulate core philosophical thoughts and historical contexts. No particular database was selected for finding academic research studies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Organizational Culture

Martin (2002) used a "cultural wars" metaphor to describe the uncertainties and existing various views of the organizational culture theory and research (p. 52). Based on Martin's list of definitions of organizational culture (pp. 57-58), table 1 summarizes key words from the various definitions of organizational culture. It seems at a glance their common themes are 'shared meanings and understandings'. For example, Schein (1992) defines organizational culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 12).

This definition of organizational culture indicates that shared values and norms are learned by members and transmitted to new members within the organization.

#### 2.1.1. Norms

Norms refer to "acceptable standards of behavior within a group that are shared by the group's members"(Robbins, 2003, p. 229). Keyton (2005, p. 24) points out three main features of norms: (a) pattern of behavior or communication; (b) what people should do in a specific setting; and (c) collective expectations of what behavior should be or what reaction should be given to a particular behavior. Thus, norms are not only written policies, procedures, or standards, but also informal and unspoken rules that guide group members' behavior. Robbins (2003) indicates that norms "differ among groups, organizations, and societies, but they all have them" (p. 229). Because norms become routine and unstated expectations about behavior, organizational members rarely discuss what the norms are (Keyton, 2005).

<Table 1> Definition Emphasized Key Words in Definitions from the Various Organizational Culture Studies

Author(s)	Definition Emphasis
Peters and Waterman (1982)	"stronger" "excellent companies" (pp. 75-76)
Smircich (1983)	"meanings" "patterns of beliefs" "worldviews" "activity" "environmental circumstances" (p. 56)
Davis (1984)	"shared beliefs and values" (p. 1)

Sergiovanni & Corbally (1984)	"shared meanings" "material objects and ritualized practices" (p. viii)
Louis (1985)	"shared" "understandings or meanings" (p. 74)
Sathe (1985)	"shared" "understandings" (p. 6)
Mills (1988)	"dominance" "conflict and contradiction" (p. 366)
Feldman (1991)	"positively or negatively valued" (p. 154)
Meyerson (1991)	"multiple meanings" "ambiguities" (pp. 131-132)
Schein (1992)	"shared basic assumptions" "integration" (p. 12)
Alvesson (2002)	"a theoretical tool for developing sensitivity for differentiation, inconsistency, confusion, conflict, and contradiction" (p. 195)
Martin (2002)	"shared meanings, conflict, and an ambiguity" (p. 62)
Hofstede & Hofstede (2005)	"the collective programming of the mind" (p. 282)

#### 2.1.2. Value

Among researchers, there is a slight difference in locating values within the levels of organizational culture. Adler (2008) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) locate values at the deepest level of culture, whereas other researchers believe that basic assumptions are at the root of culture (Cummings & Worley, 2001; Keyton, 2005; Schein, 1992). However, most of the literature agrees with the importance of values that influence attitudes and behavior. Anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1967) defines a value as "a conception or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions"(p. 395). Values communicate to organization members what is important or unimportant in the organization, what is right or wrong, what they ought to do or not do , and what deserves their attention (Adler, 2008; Cummings & Worley, 2001). Robbins (2003) notes that values "lay the foundation for the understanding of attitudes and motivation" (p. 64), and influence our perceptions. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) also describe values as "the core of culture" according to their "skins of an onion" metaphor (p. 8).

There are three main characteristics of cultural values. First, generally, values are not fluid and flexible. In other words, because people acquire values in their early years – from parents, teachers, friends, and others –and those values tend to remain relatively stable over time (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Robbins, 2003). Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) note, values are "broad tendencies and preferences"and deal with contrasting ideas such as evil versus good, dirty versus clean, dangerous versus safe, forbidden versus permitted, decent versus indecent, moral ver-

sus immoral, ugly versus beautiful, unnatural versus natural, abnormal versus normal, paradoxical versus logical, and irrational versus rational (p. 8). In relation to work and organizations, for example, Keyton (2005) includes prestige, wealth, control, authority, ambition, pleasure, independence, creativity, equality, tolerance, respect, commitment, politeness, and harmony.

The second distinct feature of organizational culture is its embeddedness. Because values are deeply embedded in organizations, they are "difficult to discern until they are manifested in behavior and shared by organizational members" (Hofstede, 2001; Keyton, 2005, p. 33). Keyton (2005) argues that "some values are subconsciously held become assumptions that we use in choosing our behavior and communication without consciously considering the choices we are making"(p. 25). Third and finally, because values are located in the deepest layer of culture, culture change tends to be much slower than its outer layers such as artifacts, rituals, and practices (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) discussed about changing practices and stable values:

Our world is changing. Technology invented by people surrounds us. The World Wide Web has made our world appear smaller, so that the notion of a "global village" seems appropriate. Business companies operate worldwide. They innovate rapidly; many do not know today what products they will manufacture and sell next year or what new job types they will need in five years...So on the surface, change is all-powerful. But how deep are these changes? Can human societies be likened to ships that are rocked about aimlessly on turbulent seas of change? Or to shores, covered and then bared again by new waves washing in, altered ever so slowly with each successive tide? ...Culture change can be fast for the outer layers of the onion diagram, labeled practices... Culture change is slow for the onion's core, labeled values. (p. 11-13)

In brief, norms and values are the core elements of organizational culture, and many researchers indicate that shared values and norms are learned by members and transmitted to new members within the organization.

Not all researchers agree that organizational culture is interpreted as shared meanings and understandings, however. For example, addressing the ignorance of gender issues within organizational settings, Mills (1988) argues:

Cultural arrangements, of which organizations are an essential segment, are seen as manifestations of a process of ideational development located within a context of definite material conditions. It is context of dominance (males over females/owners over workers) but also of conflict and contradiction in which class and gender, autonomous but over determined, are vital dynamics. Ideas and cultural arrangements confront actors as a series of rules of behavior; rules that, in their contradictions, may variously be enacted, followed, or resisted. (p. 366)

Alvesson (2002) also argues that "culture is best perceived not simply as a provider of clues for understanding social integration and harmony and guiding behavior, but also as a theoretical tool for developing sensitivity for differentiation, incon-

sistency, confusion, conflict, and contradiction"(p. 195). The concepts of organizational culture by Mills and Alvesson, refer to organizational culture as "dominance," "conflict and contradiction," and "inconsistency and confusion."

Other researchers, Feldman (1991), Meyerson (1991), and Martin (2002), stress "ambiguities" of organizational culture. No clear shared meanings and understandings and no clear conflicts and contradiction characterize their concepts of organizational culture (Martin, 2002). Instead of specializing in a focused area, Martin's definition covers a broad range of topics relevant to the understanding of organizational culture. Martin (2002) concludes that:

When organizations are examined from a cultural viewpoint, attention is drawn to aspects of organizational life that historically have often been ignored or understudied, such as the stories people tell to newcomers to explain "how things are done around here," the ways in which offices are arranged and personal items are or are not displayed, jokes people tell, the working atmosphere (hushed and luxurious or dirty and noisy), the relations among people (affectionate in some areas of an office and obviously angry and perhaps competitive in another place), and so on. Cultural observers also often attend to aspects of working life that other researchers study, such as the organization's official policies, the amounts of money different employees earn, reporting relationships, and so on. A cultural observer is interested in the surfaces of these cultural manifestations because details can be informative, but he or she also seeks an in-depth understanding of the pattern of meanings that link these manifestations together, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in bitter conflicts between groups, and sometimes in webs of ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. (p. 3)

Despite the many different perspectives to organizational culture, there are three viewpoints that are taken into consideration for this study. The first and second viewpoints stem from Smircich's (1983) paradigmatic distinction between two facets of organizational culture: as something an organization has and as something an organization is. In the first viewpoint, researchers who believe that an organization has culture treat culture as a variable among other variables, such as members, structure, leadership, and technology. This perspective can be seen as a functionalist viewpoint that examines how an organization's culture can be managed and how "strong culture" will lead to outcomes that the organization desires (Martin, 2002). Second, other researchers, however, see culture as a root metaphor that represents the idea that culture is something that the organization is. That is, they see culture as a metaphor of organization, not just as discrete variable to be manipulated at will (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). In other words, under this perspective culture is a metaphor, a lens of viewing and understanding organizational life. Organizations are understood not mainly in managerial terms, but in terms of their expressive and symbolic aspects (Smircich, 1983). Third, the critical viewpoint is concerned primarily with sociopolitical aspects that are manifested in many different ways in organizations (Keyton, 2005).

Under this perspective, organizations are sites of hierarchy, dominance, and power.

To sum up, each perspective has its own unique way of approaching organizational culture from different angles, but each of them places emphasis on one aspect of organizational culture and thus is incomplete. This study argues that viewing an organization from only one viewpoint of these three perspectives is limiting. Therefore, this study suggests that organizational culture should be viewed from all three theoretical perspectives simultaneously. Under this perspective, the following sections address historical and philosophical elements of organizational culture.

## 2.2. The Historical Viewpoints of Organizational Culture

### 2.2.1. The Corporate Culture Boom

After Pettigrew's article, *On Studying Organizational Cultures* (1979), was introduced into the mainstream of scholarly management literature, several organizational culture studies appeared. Basically, the success of Japanese business was the impetus for several researchers to research into its organizational culture in the early 1980s (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Atho, 1982). These researchers introduced and examined Japanese corporate culture, and triggered the interest in organizational culture from both academics and practitioners (e.g., studies by Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982).

During this period, there was a wealth of research that offered the promise that a 'strong' integrated culture would enhance performance improvement and maximize greater productivity and profitability (Martin, 2002). This view of corporate culture as "a universal tool for competitiveness and excellence" (Alvesson, 2002, p. 7) or functionalist viewpoint (Martin, 2002) is consistent with studies of culture as a variable by Smircich (1983).

In contrast to this functionalist approach, other researchers adopted a more symbolic or descriptive approach which views culture as a lens of examining organizational life (e.g., Barley, 1983; Schultz, 1991). Drawing on Smircich's culture as a root metaphor, this approach focuses more on the interpretation of symbols, such as rituals, stories, or myths. Whether it focuses on functional or symbolic aspects of culture, these studies can be also seen as Meyerson and Martin's (1987) integration perspective that sees organizational culture as an organizational set of common and shared values. Most studies during this period focused on "the consistencies of values, attitudes, and behaviors within a particular organization that distinguish it from others" (Ashkanasy, 2003, p. 302).

### 2.2.2. The Variation

During the early 1980s, roughly at the same time as studies of the functionalist and descriptive research evolved, another group of researchers attempted to examine opposing points of view that had been silenced by the studies with the traditional

viewpoints (Gregory, 1983; Riley, 1983; Rousseau, 1990). These researchers argued that an organization is not simply a single, monolithic dominant culture; instead, it is a collection of subcultures that coexist in relationships of intergroup harmony, conflict, or indifference (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). Meanwhile, in the mid and late 1980s, the other group of researchers (e.g., Brunsson, 1985; Feldman, 1989) focused on the ambiguous nature of organizational life and "multiplicities of interpretation that do not coalesce into the collectivity-wide consensus characteristics of traditional research and that do not create a subcultural consensus" (Martin, 2002, p. 107). In other words, conflicts and opposing views within subcultures are not clearly defined. But instead ambiguity exists with regard to organizational culture. In sum, during this period several groups of researchers attempted to understand organizational culture from different angles that illustrate the differentiated and multi-faced aspects of organizational culture.

### 2.2.3. The Critical Viewpoint

Although the functional and descriptive, and other differentiated viewpoints, still continue to proliferate today in organizational culture research (Martin et al., 2006), during the early 1990s, some researchers advocated for a more critical perspective that was opposed to the cultural studies that are often value-neutral and objectivist, and only aim to help organizations improve their productivity and performance (Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Barley et al., 1988; Putnam et al., 1993). The critical theorists have argued that using the lens of power and politics to understand organizational culture has been largely ignored by the mainstream researchers, so that it is important to recognize the "sociopolitical and structural power issues that are integrated and built into the day-to-day interaction and that influence perceptions of power throughout the organization" (Keyton, 2005, p. 100).

In short, the history of organizational culture shows that several different perspectives have emerged and been put forward in order to better understand various issues and interests within the organizational contexts. Those ongoing debates have been making a valuable contribution to the field of organizational culture and organizational theory in general.

## 2.3. The Philosophical Elements of Organizational Culture

As a basic subject matter of metaphysics, philosophy concerning the way of understanding what is, the ontology is a study of assumptions about the nature of reality. The philosophical foundations of this paper's perspective on organizational culture reflect two different kinds of ontological assumptions. Adopting Ashkanasy, Wilderom, and Peterson's (2000) different kinds of ontologies of organizational culture, two assumptions to what they call a structural realist ontology and a social construction ontology are discussed. First, under the structural realist ontological orientation, organizations exist as structures that

have a variety of properties, including culture. The structural realist ontology asserts that "the fundamental constituents of the physical world are structures" (Ryckman, 2005, p. 242). From this perspective, an organization is a kind of structure that has a culture. This perspective is consistent with Smircich's (1983) paradigmatic mode of organizational culture as something an organization has. This perspective is also congruent with Chia's (1996) being-realism, a reality that "preexists independently of observation" (p. 33), enabling researchers to "treat ideas, such as "organizations" or "cultures," as unproblematic objects of analysis (Martin, 2002, p. 31).

Second, the social construction ontology emphasizes the "varying regularity in events that happen and gives researchers room to select which sets of events to group together into a culture" (Ashkanasy et al., 2000, p. 7). The ontological view of social construction is that "the existence or manner of existence of a thing is dependent, in some substantial part, upon the social world" (Crossley, 2005, p. 214). In other words, in the social construction reality, the concept of reality is constructed by the various activities of social agents. Under this perspective, an organization is a kind of culture (Ashkanasy et al., 2000). Smircich's other facet of organizational culture as something an organization is corresponds to this ontological orientation and Chia's becoming-realism which views "organizations not only as outcomes of organizing processes, but as processes in themselves" (Hancock & Tyler, 2001, p. 87). The ontology adopted by the critical viewpoint is also derived from the social construction ontological perspective. Under this perspective, reality is socially constructed. Thus, the social reality is shaped by social, political, economic, ethnic and other factors that develop over time (Yolles, 2000).

The philosophical foundations also reflect two epistemological orientations. Epistemology, the philosophical branch concerning the way of understanding what it means to know, deals with the nature of knowledge. As Crotty (1998) notes, ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together. In this sense, in accordance with Chia's being-realism ontology, researchers who take the representational epistemological stance believe external facts and objects to be the source of meaning and truth (Alasuutari, 1995). The representational epistemology that stems from the positivist paradigm assumes people know that there is an objective reality apart from our perception and use symbols and language to accurately describe and explain that objective reality (Chia, 1996; Martin, 2002). Under this perspective, language is used "unproblematically, to represent reality, accurately communicating what is out there" (Martin, 2002, p. 31). Generally, this epistemological position in terms of organizational culture is embodied in functional or instrumental dimensions that often emphasize harmony, consensus, clarity, external adaptation, and internal integration (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 1985).

Further, these assumptions typically relate to concerns about their methodology of choice. From this epistemological stance, a quantitative or etic approach (outsider point of view) is often

used to measure various dimensions of culture in organizations (Martin, 2002). Deductive approaches that emphasize applicable cultural dimensions or analytic categories are derived from this epistemological orientation (Ashkanasy et al., 2000). Hofstede's (1980, 1991, 2001) longitudinal study of cultural values in terms of power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, tolerance for ambiguity, and time orientation in a multinational business environment is an example of this approach.

In contrast, researchers who subscribe to the subjectivist epistemological stance gain new knowledge based on existing knowledge and experiences. In other words, they view all forms of research as inherently subjective (Preissle & Grant, 2004). In accordance with Chia's becoming-realism, "researchers and cultural members subjectively interpret and represent what they observe rather than perceiving an objective reality" (Martin, 2002, p. 34). Methodologically, under this epistemological stance, researchers often use a qualitative or emic approach (insider point of view) to understand cultural practices. Inductive approaches that "emerge from the bottom up (rather than from the top down), from many disparate pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 6), are often used for this kind of research.

Epistemologically critical theory is subjectivist, which leads to research results being value-laden by the beliefs and assumptions of the inquirer (Yolles, 2000). Influenced by the Marxist tradition and developed by the Frankfurt School in the early 1920's, critical theory opposes the deterministic positivism advocated by the scientists, who build on scientific discovery largely by objective, verifiable, reductionistic, and value-neutral knowledge and facts. Thus, for critical organizational researchers, knowledge is linked to socio-political perspectives and is used for emancipatory ends and other political aims. As Alvesson (2002) argues, organizational culture research has been largely favored by positivists or functionalists who focus mainly on shared values, consistent behavioral norms, commitment, productivity, performance improvement, and building a strong corporate culture. But there is also another side of culture, and critical theorists in organizational contexts focus more on an emancipatory view on knowledge.

### 3. Conclusion

The present paper discussed definitions of organizational culture with different views, the history of organizational culture, and the philosophical elements of organizational culture. Culture in an organization is important but complex. Because of the complex nature of organizational culture, there are different lenses for identifying and investigating the culture. Each perspective has its own point of view, and offers a unique solution to the complex phenomena. Although the different perspectives have different theoretical assumptions and concerns, they complement each other. The viewpoints which attempt to reduce the mul-

ti-faced nature of organizational culture to a single explanatory perspective must be rejected. As the researchers have already stated my views on organizational culture and ontological and epistemological positions, both objectivist and subjectivist assumptions have influenced theories and practices in organizational studies and need to be considered, which yields a more complete and deeper understanding of organizational culture. This notion suggests that cultural studies in organizations include physical manifestations as well as the subjective meanings associated with these observable manifestations (Martin, 2002). Furthermore, asking "Whose interests are being served?" is necessary, although it is often implicit and difficult to decipher. As Martin (2002) suggests, "culture has both material and ideational aspects" (p. 35). This study believes that both must be studied, even though it is not easy to seek a balance between the two different perspectives.

The concept of organizational culture remains an important feature of organizational effectiveness and a variety of organizational development initiatives. Adult educators in their workplaces and HR professionals and researchers who are involved in improving organizational effectiveness through organizational change interventions need to fully understand how organizational culture has developed and what beliefs and assumptions underlie it. The lack of a well-established concept of organizational culture can impede an organization's ability to respond to new competitive challenges.

Moreover, this study provides a major implication for theory and research for the field of distribution science with a better understanding of philosophical and historical foundations of organizational culture that scholars and practitioners should understand in order to better develop a solid foundation of the field. Also, there is a limitation to this study. Since this study focused on Western philosophical elements and historical contexts, an investigation of Korean and/or Eastern philosophical thoughts and historical contexts would provide valuable insight to organizational studies.

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