

# Cultural and Symbolic Approach and the Finnish Organizational Research

## What is the cultural approach in organizational research?

Starting in the seventies and into the eighties, the cultural perspective blossomed in organizational research. The goal was for a new understanding of the structures and processes of organizations. Certainly, cultural approaches to organizational life had a history i.e., the human relations perspective in management or the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology. But the expansion of the cultural perspectives into organizational analysis in the seventies and eighties was something rather new. As Pasquale Gagliardi puts it later in this special issue, "...the extraordinary development in the 'cultural approach' towards organizations and the way in which 'culture' has become the dominant metaphor in the thinking not only academic but also managerial community" reiterates the focus and theme of this special issue.

Multidisciplinary interests are highlighted in several highly ranked international journals in the field that have published special issues on cultural and symbolic phenomena in organizations. The first special edition was in *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1983) and the most recent in *International Studies of Management and Organization* (1990). Many reasons lie behind this "cultural movement" in organizational studies. We would like to mention three broad elements here. They involve both practical and academic matters.

First, the growth of global markets (and politics) contributes to the growth of cultural studies. Managers in organizations must now face the fact that cultural diversity may impact corporate productivity both positively and negatively. Second, not only is culture heterogeneity embodied by the people in organizations but culture is attached to the many products and services put forth by organizations. The east goes west and the west goes east as culture flows in the marketplace. Third, what might be called "a paradigmatic evolution" in the social and behavioral sciences contributes to the growth of cultural studies. "Interpretative" paradigms in social sciences are becoming increasingly popular, especially in organizational analysis. Our opinion is that the practitioner's world and academic's world are coming together. This corresponds to Barley et al. (*ASQ* 1/1988) empirical study of publications in the field suggesting that over time academics are moving toward the practitioner's point of view. Currently, the "cultural approach" to organizational study is a shared arena for researchers with varying disciplinary roots. Cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, history, linguistics, cognitive epistemology, and communication study all treat organizations as cultural entities.

One result of all this cultural study is that certain phenomena have become quite visible and, if not exactly laid bare, at least, better understood. Myth, ritual, language, value, and belief have all been studied and linked in various ways to work behavior. To understand individual and group actions in an organization requires a good deal more these days than the variables drawn from functional models of organizations. Many researchers are convinced that formal structure provides only a rudimentary frame for understanding the individual behavior in organizations.

The cultural approach has not been just a "language game" played by disciplinary scholars but is a game played by pragmatic change agents too. Practical scholars in management schools and consultants outside these schools

have generated strategies and techniques for changing or manipulating the culture of an organization.

Despite the growing status of the cultural approach in organizational analysis, there are drawbacks too. Many researchers have argued that the cultural approach is simply old wine in a new bottle, a replication, as it was, of such tried and fired notions like informal groups, organizational climate and the broad influence of leadership styles. The critics come from two directions. On one side are the researchers who follow functionalistic and structural explanations of organizations and management. On the other side are the post-modernists, who have argued that the whole "cultural approach" is nothing but a new form of functionalism. For us, the truth seems to be as yet unspoken.

## The cultural approach in Finland

In Finnish organizational research and consultation activities, the cultural approach is also in fashion. Cultural discourse is influencing general discussions about business corporations and public agencies. Many managers are speaking about such matters as "the profit culture," "the service culture," or "the new political culture." But if we take a narrower research perspective and compare the current situation in Finland with the other Nordic countries and beyond, we notice our undeveloped status. In Finland the group of researchers who have been seriously interested in cultural themes is relatively small and, so far, poorly connected. Consider (1) how few articles on organizational culture are published domestically or internationally by Finnish researchers; (2) how few published doctoral dissertations and the licentiate theses are written on cultural phenomena in organizations; and (3) the low level of participation of Finnish scholars in professional culture study associations such as, in SCOS (Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism). One reason for this may be the relative novelty or newness of the interpretative social sciences in Finland and the predictably slight impact on organizational research these approaches have had in our country.

## The purposes and the content of this special issue

This special issue brings to Finnish scholars, consultants, and managers, some emerging perspectives on the cultural and symbolic approaches to organizational study. The articles included in this volume represent some of the current trends in culture-oriented research on organizations and management. There are two broad ways the various authors represented here have constructed their cultural analysis of organizational life. First, some authors use cultural concepts and interpretative methodologies as a "microscope." By using the microscope, researchers look to the cognitive, symbolic, and emotional processes inside the formal boundaries of organizations. Phenomena which have been formerly overlooked and treated as residual factors in organizational life become visible and central under the cultural microscope. In this type of analysis, work organizations and work groups are seen as "small societies." At the beginning of this special issue are articles in which the authors are paying attention to the small societies in organizations.

Second, other authors turn the cultural "microscope" around and use it as a "telescope." Researchers using culture as a telescope see society from an organizational perspective. They study the link between the institutionalized and therefore organizational life of people and the character of the society of

which they are a part. Some fresh ideas are developed here about the role of the work organization in post-modern societies and vice versa. The second part of this special issue presents articles explicitly concerned with societal-organizational relations.

### **The Selections:**

The first article is "Organizational Anthropology, Organization Theory, and Management Practice" written by Pasquale Gagliardi. He suggests the bridging of the gap between theory and practice in organizational research occurs through a "revised functionalism". This phrase implies "an up-dated version of the traditional principles of organizations" but seen in light current cultural scholarship.

The second paper is "Firms Producing the Culture of Meaning and Meaningless" written by Iiris Marjosola. In this article she analyzes certain "quality" aspects of culture in a business corporation and discusses the possibilities and limitations of planned or intentional cultural change in business organizations.

The third article is "Concepts of Organizational Culture and Presumed Links to Efficiency" by Mats Alvesson. His paper analyzes the problems associated with the relations between the culture and (economic) performance of organizations. Alvesson addresses and tries to solve the general problem of how to demonstrate the link between cultural phenomena and human actions in organizational settings.

Henrik Gahmberg's "Organizational Ideology and Leadership: A Semiotic View" is the fourth article. His discussion places the term ideology within management literature and tries to understand just how ideology influences management practices. According to Gahmberg, leadership and followership in an organization are "actions of storytellers."

The fifth article is "Combining Methods in Organizational Culture Analysis" written by Juha Kinnunen. He discusses certain methodological problems emerging in the empirical analysis of organizational culture. The empirical case study concerns a health care organization and represents a "cognitive perspective" on organizational culture.

Ita O'Donovan explicitly analyzes the societal organization relations in the sixth article: "British Society and the Culture of British Local Government: The Influence of Society on Organizational Culture". Her analysis covers the period from World War II to the end of the Margaret Thatcher's regime. In the article, she highlights many points which are also relevant to the research and interests of Finnish public administration.

Risto Harisalo focuses on "Local Entrepreneurial Culture: A Conceptual Approach" in the seventh article. He formulates certain theoretical principles for examining and understanding the "new entrepreneurial reality" of local governments. The assumptions of various stakeholders in local government agencies are highlighted in the analysis.

In the eighth article, Christian Scholtz analyzes the development of culture in European companies. His article is titled: "Corporate Culture and Europe 1992." The topic is certainly timely and he reminds us that many cultural differences among European countries remains despite the unification apparent on the surface levels.

Finally, John Van Maanen tells a tale about "Disney Worlds: Culture on the Move" in the ninth article. He looks at culture-as-a-product rather than culture-as-a-process and illustrates how cultural experiences as symbolic capital move about in a partly-unified post-modern world.

The writings, presented here, provide readers a brief look at some of the on-going research in organizational culture and symbolism. The editing process started approximately a year ago when this group of writers plus several more who were unfortunately squeezed out of this issue were invited to contribute. We regret not having the space to accommodate all of those who wished to participate in this project. Maybe next time.

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