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Organizational Culture: From Concept to Applications

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The five papers published in the *Anthropology of Work Review* special issue on "Anthropological Approaches to Organizational Cultures" (Fall 1989) focus on a number of important theoretical and methodological concerns pertinent to anthropological studies of organizations. They include the following:

Ann T. Jordan "Organizational Culture: It's Here, But Is It Anthropology?"

Tomoko Hamada "Perspective on Organizational Culture"

Marietta L. Baba "Organizational Culture: revisiting the small-society metaphor"

David R. Michaelson "The Current Practice of Corporate Culture: Is It True Ethnographic Analysis?"

Frederick C. Gamst "The Concept of Organizational and Corporate Culture: An Ethnological View"

I present a general overview of the principal issues raised. My remarks fall into the following areas: divergent definitions of the culture concept, the organizational culture subculture-culture of society nexus, organizational change, and methodological and applied issues.

Divergent Definitions of the Culture Concept

The authors cite numerous scholarly and popular works on organizational culture, corporate culture, and organizational theory. Fred Gamst, Meta Baba, and Ann Jordan, in particular, provide an excellent set of references. The benefits of the comprehensive bibliography accompanying these papers notwithstanding, my attention quickly turned to one particular issue: different definitions of the term culture employed by management specialists and anthropologists. Jordan indicates that the term culture for members of the business community is not the holistic, integrated concept most anthropologists use, but rather is "additive"—"just one more factor like 'structure' or 'market' . . . " Although David Michaelson does not provide a specific definition of culture from the viewpoint of the management specialist, he argues that the use of the term culture in business is "even confused with certain basic concepts such as business strategy. . . . " Gamst states that organizational practitioners view the culture of an organization as "uniform," "moldable" and "nonholistic." Furthermore, Tomoko Hamada notes a correlation between the organizational principals of firms in several Pacific Rim countries and their economic success. She also indicates a growing American interest in learning how organizational cultures work and using them to one's advantage.

These authors suggest that culture is viewed as a "thing" by managers, as some intangible, yet manageable aspect of an organization. I detected a judgment on the part of these authors that the business community employs an inaccurate definition of culture. It may be that this definitional divergence between the anthropological and business communities is compounded further by the wide variety of definitions of culture employed by anthropologists generally. It may be useful for anthropologists working in the area of organizational research to arrive at some agreement on an operational definition of culture in an organizational setting—not only for members of the business world, but also for members of the academic community.

In my own research, I too have run into the anthropological-business community divergence in the culture concept. On the one hand, the inclination is to tell these managers that not only are they using the term inappropriately, but also that they cannot manipulate culture as if it were a proposed budget or headcount allotment. However, it is important to keep in mind that a manager's view of culture, just like his/her view of business strategies, quality, or any other aspect of the work environment, represents empirical data. The concept of culture has specific meaning for that manager and as such, is part of his/her world view. There is a long ideological tradition in American corporations that the work environment, including the work force, can be controlled (cf. Taylor 1911). Thus, it comes as no surprise that managers believe that culture can be manipulated. The culture concept employed by any organizational members gives us insight into their individual beliefs and actions, and the organizational forces which influence ideology and place constraints on behavior. As applied researchers, we must figure out what the concept means to organizational members, how it is used, the context in which it is invoked, and the relationship of what the concept means with the problem or issue under study.

A related question for the anthropologist might be, is it ever useful to provide organizational members with an anthropological definition of culture, and if so, under what circumstances? On one of my projects at General Motors (GM), I found that both managers and non-managerial employees consistently referred to the culture of their work environment in terms of specific ideal characteristics. Their culture was synonymous with their concept of teamwork—a concept presented to them as trainees in a new office. As the study progressed, it became clear that the ideal culture was not the "operative culture" as Gamst points out. Indeed, teamwork took a new and less desirable form because of the introduction of certain job tasks into their daily routines. The employees soon indicated that their culture was "slipping." In presentations to employees of the results, I contrasted their definition of culture with one anthropological definition (focused on shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior). My intention was to help them understand that because their planned, ideal culture (based on a shared concept of teamwork) had not taken into account a particular set of behaviors (the new job tasks), they accurately perceived that their actual culture was slipping.

The Organizational Culture-Subculture-Culture of Society Nexus

While organizational culture tends to have its locus in the organization with studies conducted primarily on site, there is a feedback relationship between the organization and its external environment. For example, the organization produces certain goods and services for some subset of the larger society, and as Gamst points out, employees' stories, experiences, and skills diffuse into the larger society. Similarly, the wider environment is a source of employees, customers, materials, services, and capital, and may be a source of technology as well (for further discussion see Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). And, as the environment external to the organization changes, organizational goals, functions, and internal resources shift (Etzioni, 1984; Katz and Kahn, 1966; Schein, 1986).

These authors recognize that an organization's culture may encompass portions of subcultures (such as a managerial or gender-based subcultures), may be synonymous with a particular subculture (such as a military organization), may be very distinctive relative to other organizations (such as AT&T versus IBM), or distinctive relative to society as a whole. In this section, I focus on aspects of two of the papers in the set which pertain to the "organizational culture-subculture-culture of society nexus." Jordan describes what she terms a culture model in which a particular organizational culture is (1) a subset of the larger culture and (2) cross cut by a "constantly changing web" of subcultures. She outlines possible ways of viewing an organization's culture, namely through an analysis of the behaviors, value systems, and artifacts found in that organization and the relationship of the organization with the wider environment. Implicit in her discussion is the argument that if an organization is studied from these perspectives, it is within the realm of anthropology, and in particular, organizational culture studied from an anthropological viewpoint.

I think what Jordan outlines in her section "Is it Anthropology?" is less a discussion of a culture model, and more a general description of how anthropological concepts and methodology can be applied in organizational settings. For example, she points out that a particular sales office employee is someone associated with various other subcultures within and beyond the organization. She provides a cross-sectional view of the complexity of an organization but does not specify the linkages or relationships between the component parts. To me, a model is an abstract configuration of specific, detailed patterns that the researcher observes and/or learns through other methods (such as interviewing and collecting archival data). A model enables the researcher to illustrate significant characteristics of the *issue* at hand, thereby establishing a comparison with other models within a given organization or any of its subunits, between different organizations, or with other portions of the society at large.

Jordan does emphasize that an appropriate unit of analysis should be chosen in conjunction with the problem under investigation. A focus on the key issue or problem is critical to the eventual analysis. One question I had with both Jordan's paper and some of the others was how an analysis of a subculture within an organization differed from an analysis of an organizational culture. I believe that the key issue or problem helps to sort out the way in which the study would be classified. Thus, a study of employees performing a particular skilled trade (regardless of organizational setting) might be viewed as an analysis of an occupational culture if aspects of the daily work environment and lifestyle were viewed within the context of the larger trade subculture. On the other hand, a study of those same employees performing their particular trade within a specific organizational setting might be viewed as a study in organizational culture if (1) the central issues facing those employees were generated from or in conjunction with their affiliation with that organization, and (2) their relationship with other organizational members concerning the main issues were specified.

A second treatment of the "organizational culture-subculture-culture of society nexus" is Baba's paper. It also provides us with a general orientation to the study of organizational culture. She develops a useful categorization of the differences between organizations and societies: the composition and mobility of the two population from each, socialization processes and extent of participation in each, and the explicit and/or implicit goals of each. Thus, we see that these conceptual categories (organizational culture and subculture, and organizational culture and culture of society) are not mutually exclusive but are associated with certain distinguishing characteristics. Based on these distinctions, Baba first notes potential interdependent effects of organizations and societies in influencing beliefs and behaviors. Then, she discusses problems associated with the metaphor that organizations have been described as "societies writ small." In particular, she argues that (1) American organizations do not have an "all-pervasive influence on organizational members," (2) are not "distinctive subcultures in their own right," (3) are multicultural and internally diverse in nature, (4) are not 'stable, isolated, or homogeneous little communities.'"

Baba's categorization and use of this metaphor are powerful illustrative devices enabling us to identify some of the most salient differences between organizations and societies. She states that the metaphor would be more useful if the dimension of complexity were introduced, that is "*complex* societies writ small." She argues, and I agree, that by making explicit the complexity dimension, it helps to clarify various issues in organizational culture research including (1) cultural integration within organizations and societies, (2) the ideology that a managerial subculture can create and sustain an organization's culture, and (3) the development of a research agenda in organizational settings. However, by her definition and categorization, organizations are not societies. My preference would have been to use the original metaphor only as a heuristic device, without rewriting it to include the complexity dimension. The complex structures, ideologies, and behaviors associated with organizational cultures could have been discussed using the original metaphor as a point of departure.

Organizational Change

Several issues were raised in the papers related to organizational change. I focus on three of the papers in this section. Hamada, for example, introduces the simile that an organization is like a "cloud in the sky" since it is in "constant flux." Elsewhere in her article she suggests that the idea of "process" is important in descriptions and analyses of organizational culture. For example, she refers to the "process of constant learning," and to the "political processes of social relationships" which are activated within an organization. She contrasts this dynamic, multidimensional image of organizational culture with the more static, one-sided/management-oriented view. This dichotomy also illustrates the historical development of organizational studies—a point made in some of the other papers.

It is useful to consider issues linking organizational change with factors both internal and external to the organization. Hamada argues that individuals are the "creative operators and change agents" within the organization. However, what exactly influences the behaviors and values of an organization's work force? What variables (and their accompanying processes) are most likely to affect an organization's culture during a transformation process? Under what conditions are the effects the greatest? Moreover, are there some variables which foster changing behaviors and values while others enhance continuity? Gamst, for example, argues that there are "conserving elements in culture" which encourage tradition and discourage innovation. I raise these questions because I am not sure how to reconcile the idea that culture is constantly changing, with the view in the popular business press that it takes years to "change" an organization's culture. Furthermore, are there differences in the acceptance of newly instituted changes within an organization when these changes are consciously planned, articulated, and/or linked with new organizational goals, rather than when they result from circumstances that are unanticipated, unstated, and/or not related to organizational objectives?

Michaelson's paper is the only one in the set which provides empirical data on which conclusions are based. I appreciate the willingness of his Fortune 200 corporation to share the results with the anthropological community. The principal focus of Michaelson's research is the documentation of the "actual culture" of a building materials corporation so that the company's management would have a better understanding of "those elements of its culture which contributed to its successful operations." Michaelson cites oral data from three sources in his analysis: the elements of a speech given by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) about his perceptions of the company's culture, the negative reaction to this speech by a group of "senior executives," and interviews with another (presumably lower-level) group of company executives about their perceptions of the culture. He notes a high degree of agreement between the CEO's perceptions and those of the (lower-level) executives, thus validating the CEO's perspective.

Michaelson's paper raises two particular organizational change issues. First, when studying changes over time, under what conditions is it sufficient to collect verbal data from informants rather than complementing those data with archival and observational data? Michaelson apparently feels that his analysis of the "actual" company culture is adequate for his argument. However, I did not see that he was able to resolve the opposing views held by the "senior executives" who reacted with cynicism to the CEO's speech, with the views of the other (lower-level) executives that he interviewed. Is it possible, for example, that his discussion refers primarily to the "ideal" company culture? If so, perhaps the senior executives reacted so negatively because they knew of various company practices which were not consistent with the ideal culture? It may be that an alternate explanation for these conflicting attitudes could be proposed on the basis of his existing data. On the other hand, it may be that additional kinds of data are necessary which would constitute a more in-depth ethnographic approach.

Second, in historically-based organizational studies, how closely should we examine the match between company objectives and the achievement of and ideology surrounding those objectives? Michaelson states that during the data collection period, the company achieved its highest level of growth and profit. I had some difficulty with the conclusions that he drew from this point. First, he does not actually present any data on company growth and profit for us to consider. Therefore, we are not in a position to evaluate the company's past and current financial status. Second, Michaelson seems to assume that "success" is limited to only growth and profit, rather than to other possible measures including certain sociocultural variables. Moreover, evidence of conflict and cynicism within the work force are not cited as detrimental to the actual culture.

Finally, he argues that there is a causal relationship between the company's financial success and the cultural elements described both in the CEO's speech and in the interviews with other (lower-level) company executives. Yet, there may have been other variables affecting the company's "success" including market response, the marketing and distribution of products, size of the work force, and the amount of available capital. Gamst also states that organizational effectiveness may be a function of an improved business cycle, decreased costs, or lessened external regulation. It is possible, however, that there is a correlation between company "success" and company values. Yet, even in this discussion, it would have been helpful if Michaelson reported changing levels of growth and profit, tracking those with any attitudinal changes he discovered during his interviews.

Baba's paper is the third one that addresses organizational change. In particular, her discussion of holism and cultural integration direct attention to issues related to organizational change and the relationship between organizational culture and the culture of the wider society. She proposes that researchers examine certain structures and processes in organizations for evidence of cultural integration: recruitment and selection procedures, education and training activities, vertical networks, and mechanisms to share "local" knowledge. Certainly, this list is not exhaustive since other structures and processes such as organizational symbols, written documentation, and the use of physical space might be equally instructive. From an empirical or applied perspective, such data might be useful in improving organizational performance. From a theoretical point of view, this discussion is important because it calls for a comparative framework, directing our attention to the relationship between the organization and the society. Baba suggests that by describing and analyzing organizations, we might learn about the wider societal environment. The data collected would document the extent to which organizations and societies are integrated or unified in their beliefs and actions.

Her discussion led me to consider an extension of the cultural integration concept—cultural change. Since organizations are continually in the process of change, it seems to me that we should investigate not only formation and stabilization processes, but also those which engender changes within organizations. I suspect that this dynamic view would give us more insight into the conflict and fragmentation that are present in organizations. We would be led to investigate some of the causes and outcomes of these forms of differentiation in the day-to-day workings of the organization. And, as an organization ages (and perhaps becomes defunct), we might learn about factors such as changes in capital and labor that are associated with its changing life cycle (Ferkany 1988; Mintzberg 1970). By pulling together knowledge gained from studies of organizational change, we also might learn about certain aspects of societal change.

Methodological and Applied Issues

In this section I focus on some of the methodological and applied issues that were raised in the papers. First, the authors call attention to the criticisms leveled at organizational studies for their almost exclusive emphasis on managerial respondents and concerns. Gamst, for example, discusses this issue in conjunction with managers' perceptions that they are able to create and manipulate the corporate culture. He points out that even in the case of a new firm, the founder culture does not remain dominant indefinitely. New "subcultures and even countercultures" emerge, presumably as the environment internal and external to the firm changes. To me, the implications of his remarks are that a managerial emphasis is inadequate in a study of corporate culture because only one subgroup in the corporation is represented.

While the field of organizational culture has been dominated by those who have been primarily interested in managerial matters and have not been trained in conducting holistic studies of particular cultures, Baba takes a somewhat different viewpoint. She argues that we should view this literature as documentation or a reflection of the "occupational culture of managers," implying that it has a certain validity in its own right. Works such as those by Schein (1985), Deal and Kennedy (1982), and Peters and Waterman (1982), provide us with information about managerial ideologies and strategies. A comparison of "'managementcentric' organizational cultures across organizations" could be very fruitful for research purposes. Thus, although the current organizational culture literature is limited in focus, the field is wide open for not only enhancing what we already know about managerial business practices, but also including more occupational subgroups within any given analysis as appropriate.

A second set of methodological issues surrounds the methods and approaches which may be used in studies of organizational culture. Michaelson, for example, employs a form of interviewing which he terms the "corporate life history." Jordan reviews some of the literature which suggests that anthropological field methods such as participant observation and ethnoscience, and the case study approach are useful. At GM, I have used a minimum of two data collection methods in my studies (some of which have been coauthored with Meta Baba)—usually interviews and archival materials, but also participant observation and survey instruments. The choice of methods, like those employed by anthropologists in nonorganizational settings, is a function of the questions under investigation and the optimal ways of accessing the data. I have used the case study approach in studying organizational subunits and a survey approach in studying employees not currently or directly affiliated with a particular subunit.

Since none of the articles specifically addresses the research process in an organizational setting, I thought that I would offer some points of contrast between my research experience at GM with my research experience in a community setting. There are several similarities in conducting anthropological research across these two types of field sites. One problem concerns *access to a potential field site*. Although I am a GM employee, I still must use my network of contacts to gain access to informants whether they work in a particular organizational subunit or are affiliated somehow with that subunit. Sometimes a contact might make an arrangement for me to attend a meeting with some of the managers in charge of a particular subunit. The purpose of the meeting might be to provide an overview of the study, a discussion of the methodological and ethical concerns, and possible applications of the research. On other occasions, no specific managerial contact is initiated at the outset of the study. Data collection proceeds solely on the basis of my non-managerial contacts, although managerial input becomes increasingly important as the study progresses. In large part, the differences between gaining access to field sites varies by the formality of the initial contact.

A second similarity concerns the *type of research* to be conducted. If the researcher is interested in basic research, to the exclusion of any applications, the researcher probably will initiate the contact directly with either members of the organization or the community. If the work has obvious applications to a particular issue facing either the organization or community, a request for research assistance may be made directly to the researcher. I have been involved in both types of studies at GM—those where I have requested permission to do a study, and others where I have been approached by an organizational subunit with a particular purpose in mind.

A third similarity relates to the type of *sampling* used in organizational and community-based studies. In both kinds of studies, I have attempted to obtain a cross-section of informants depending on the particular issues at hand. I usually have done purposeful samples drawn on the basis of my growing network—whether of employees or community members. For example, sampling salaried and hourly employees, rather than just managerial employees, ensures a variety of employee perspectives.

There are also some differences in the field work experience in organizations and communities. One of the differences is the *form in which the data are presented*. In a community-based study, the researcher tends to be relatively free to write up the findings in a manner he/she deems appropriate such as in the form of a narrative, traditional ethnography, or "thick description." For basic research projects, oral presentation may not be required or appropriate. In an anthropological study conducted in and for an organization, the presentation of results, whether in oral or written form, is a usual part of the work environment. In formal oral presentations, brevity and simplicity are critical, with transparencies employed to provide an overview of the key points. Key words focus the discussion which then is supplemented with various graphics or illustrations.

At GM, quantitative analyses are emphasized in written reports. Numbers and the meaning attached to them are an important GM cultural trait. In many conversations at GM, I have heard that quantitative data analysis is associated with scientific rigor. My experience has been that by acknowledging this particular trait, and using it to advantage, it is easier to get and sustain attention regarding the results. My strategy has been to use the quantitative aspects of the analysis as the foundation and to embellish them with the qualitative data—including informant statements or descriptions of general trends. The managers with whom I have come into contact seem to value the qualitative data because it is presented in the context of a more formal quantitative analysis. Furthermore, I have found that this "constraint" already has encouraged me to develop a variation on a quantitative technique for analyzing and making inferences about qualitative data (Briody 1989)—a positive benefit in my view.

A second difference concerns the *disparate views* held by members of the anthropological academic community about conducting research in organizations and communities. Based on numerous conversations I have had with both anthropologists and students training to be anthropologists, I have noted a general consensus that organizations, particularly business organizations, are viewed as intrinsically "unethical." The anthropological academic community seems to have passed judgment on American firms categorically—an ideology that does not apply to community-based studies. Indeed, organizations seem to be treated more like individuals (in that personal traits such as ethical behavior are attributed to them) than like communities. There may be some well-documented, historically-based reasons for this anti-organizational ideology, including the exploitative strategies of multinational corporations in developing nations. However, I suspect that part of the ideology is a reflection of anthropologists' lack of knowledge or association with the business community. It is important to keep in mind that just as there is variation within any given population on certain characteristics, so too is there variation within any given firm or subunit of that firm.

The anti-organizational ideology also may be fueled by a *data ownership* issue. (This issue may not necessarily apply to independent researchers conducting research in an organizational setting.) Data ownership has two subissues associated with it: confidentiality of those participating in the study and the publication of findings for an outside audience. Concerning the first subissue, I believe that the ethical concerns surrounding informant confidentiality are similar whether the researcher is working in an organization or in a community (cf. Cassell and Jacobs 1987). Confidentiality always has been a personal matter between me and my informants, and over which I have had final authority. I am aware that organizations legally own the data and may demand it under certain circumstances. However, similar confidentiality issues may arise with any financier of a research project—such as the National Science Foundation. I have never faced that kind of ethical dilemma. I attribute it, in part, to my "up-front" discussions with management not only about such ethical considerations (so that they would understand and be supportive of my position), but also about the status of the project at each phase of development [cf. Whyte 1984; Punch 1988].

A second subissue concerns the outside publication of the findings. Usually publication is not restricted by communities because there are few, if any, formal mechanisms that can inhibit academic freedom. Data collected by an employee, however, belongs to the corporation. The publication of research findings may be restricted for proprietary reasons (since they may provide an advantage for competitors), for reasons related to contradictions with current corporate policy (such as those on products or market position), or for reasons related to GM's public image. For a GM research report to be released for outside publication, it must be reviewed by representatives of the General Technical Committee. They may deny publication or request that the author modify certain aspects of the report. For example, on one occasion I was asked to rename particular GM program using a fictitious name; the content of the report remained the same. In the case of another report which I considered to be sensitive relative to GM's public image, I decided not to attempt to publish it outside the corporation. I have learned how important it is to work well with organizational members—first to get them to understand the importance of publishing the results for the scientific community, and second to accommodate their requests as much as possible within the bounds of individual and/or discipline-specific ethical principals (See for discussion the Ethical Guidelines for Practitioners, developed by the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology).

A third difference, and a principal one from my perspective, is the *use of the results* by members of the organization or community. A community-based study often involves the provision of the study's results to selected community members—individual residents, municipal leaders, and/or a particular organization or institution associated with the community (such as a labor union, church, library, club, or agency). And, the study may include specific recommendations for the community to consider. All of the GM studies in which I have been involved even if they originated as a piece of basic research, have involved a formal set of recommendations for organizational changes. Thus, the work always has potential applications for the organization. In some cases, the recommendations are listed in a report while in others they are part of a formal presentation to organizational members. At least in my case, the research projects have a very pragmatic focus so that the organization may benefit directly.

Two of the papers briefly address the issue regarding implementation of recommendations for organizational changes. Michaelson seems to imply that information to improve "understanding" rather than "prescriptions" to a company's problems is sufficient, presumably because knowledge about the organization is transferred to key decision makers. Gamst, on the other hand, asks but does not answer, "on what (or whose) ground does one stand when making organizational value judgments?" I am not sure whether he is questioning the relevance of recommending improvements in organizational effectiveness. From my point of view, recommendations should be made and should stem directly form the issue under investigation and the conclusions drawn from the study. All judgments are value judgments, but applied researchers are trained to make such judgments on the basis of their data and theoretical/disciplinary perspective. The recommendations should not be coined in terms of who will win or who will lose, but rather, what suggestions can be implemented in an attempt to resolve existing organizational problems. The recommendations from my studies, for example, are not person-specific. They are stated as objectively as possible and written to encourage the achievement of general organizational goals.

To conclude this review, I would argue that organizational researchers can play a critical role in influencing the change process in an organization. If their studies are scientifically sound and highly valid, they can serve as a strong foundation for the implementation of recommendations. Furthermore, if informants have provided input into the study and if they have been active participants in the discussions of the results and recommendations, suggested organizational changes tend to be entertained rather than disregarded. Under such conditions, researchers are in an excellent mediating position to help plan for change because they have at least some support form within the organization.

Since a number of variables both internal and external to the organization may affect the change process (such as cost, timing, and headcount reallocation), a serious challenge researchers face is to get the recommendations implemented. Frequently, the recommendations either are not implemented or are implemented only if they can be handled quickly and easily by members of the particular organizational subunit under study. From my perspective, the challenge is to develop strategies for accessing and then convincing high-level organizational members (who oversee the particular subunit) of the value of the recommendations. These individuals have the power and authority to initiate and support broad-based organizational change—change which may cross-cut more than one organizational subunit. By working with them, applied researchers are in an advantageous position to resolve organizational problems.

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