CHAPTER 20
CULTURAL APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONS

Outline

I. Introduction.
   A. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz views cultures as webs of shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sensemaking.
   B. Geertz's work has focused on Third World cultures, but his ethnographic approach has been applied by others to organizations.
   C. In the field of speech communication, Michael Pacanowsky has applied Geertz's approach in his research of organizations.
   D. Pacanowsky asserts that communication creates and constitutes the taken-for-granted reality of the world.

II. Culture as a metaphor of organizational life.
   A. Interest in culture as a metaphor for organizations stems from our recent interest in Japanese corporations.
   B. Corporate culture has several meanings.
      1. The surrounding environment that constrains a company's freedom of action.
      2. An image, character, or climate controlled by a corporation.
      3. Pacanowsky argues that culture is not something an organization has, but is something an organization is.

III. What culture is; what culture is not.
   A. Geertz and his colleagues do not distinguish between high and low culture.
   B. Culture is not whole or undivided.
   C. Pacanowsky argues that the web of organizational culture is the residue of employees' performances.
   D. The elusive nature of culture prompts Geertz to label its study a “soft science.”

IV. Thick description—what ethnographers do.
   A. Participant observation, the research methodology of ethnographers, is a time-consuming process.
   B. Pacanowsky researched Gore & Associates.
   C. Although Pacanowsky now works with Gore, the company he researched, he earlier cautioned against “going native.”
   D. Thick description refers to the intertwined layers of common meaning that underlie what people say and do.
      1. Thick description involves tracing the many strands of a cultural web and tracking evolving meaning.
      2. Thick description begins with a state of bewilderment.
      3. The puzzlement is reduced by observing as a stranger in a foreign land.
E. Ethnographers approach their research very differently from behaviorists.
   1. They are more interested in the significance of behavior than in statistical analysis.
   2. Pacanowsky warns that statistical analysis and classification across organizations yield superficial results.
F. As an ethnographer, Pacanowsky is particularly interested in imaginative language, stories, and nonverbal rites and rituals.

V. Metaphors: taking language seriously.
   A. Widely used metaphors offer a starting place for assessing the shared meaning of a corporate culture.
   B. Metaphors are valuable tools for both the discovery and communication of organizational culture.

VI. The symbolic interpretation of story.
   A. Stories provide windows into organizational culture.
   B. Pacanowsky focuses on the script-like qualities of narratives that line out roles in the company play.
   C. Pacanowsky posits three types of organizational narratives.
      1. Corporate stories reinforce management ideology and policies.
      2. Personal stories define how individuals would like to be seen within an organization.
      3. Collegial stories—usually unsanctioned by management—are positive or negative anecdotes about others within the organization that pass on how the organization “really works.”
   D. Both Geertz and Pacanowsky caution against simplistic interpretation of stories.
   E. Pacanowsky has demonstrated that scholars can use fiction to convey the results of their research.

VII. Ritual: this is the way it’s always been, and always will be.
   A. Rituals articulate multiple aspects of cultural life.
   B. Some rituals are nearly sacred and difficult to change.

VIII. Can the manager be an agent of cultural change?
   A. The cultural approach is popular with executives who want to use it as a tool, yet culture is extremely difficult to manipulate.
   B. Even if such manipulation is possible, it may be unethical.
   C. Linda Smircich notes that communication consultants may violate the ethnographer’s rule of nonintervention and may even extend management’s control within an organization.

IX. Critique: is the cultural approach useful?
   A. The cultural approach is criticized by corporate consultants, who believe that knowledge should be used to influence organizational culture.
   B. Critical theorists attack the cultural approach because it does not evaluate the customs it portrays.
C. The goal of symbolic analysis is to create a better understanding of what it takes to function effectively within the culture.

D. The cultural approach may fall short on one of the criteria for good interpretive theory, aesthetic appeal.

**Key Names and Terms**

*Clifford Geertz*
Princeton University anthropologist who pioneered the ethnographic study of culture.

*Culture*
A socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, interpretations, premises, and rules; complex webs of shared meaning.

*Organizational Culture*
A web of shared meanings; the residue of employee performances by which members constitute and reveal their culture to themselves and others.

*Michael Pacanowsky*
A communication researcher, formerly at the University of Colorado and now a consultant at W.L. Gore & Associates, who has applied Geertz’s methodology to organizational communication.

*Thick Description*
The process of tracing the many strands of a cultural web and tracking evolving meaning.

*Corporate Stories*
Stories that reinforce management ideology and company policy.

*Personal Stories*
Stories that company personnel tell about themselves, often to define how they would like to be seen within the organization.

*Collegial Stories*
Unsanctioned anecdotes about other people in the organization.

*Rituals*
Repeated performances that articulate significant aspects of cultural life.

*Linda Smircich*
A University of Massachusetts management professor who draws on parallels to anthropological ethnography to raise ethical qualms about communication consulting.

**Principal Changes**

This chapter was previously Chapter 19. In this edition, Griffin has revised the Critique section (particularly in terms of critical theory), and updated the Second Look section.
Suggestions for Discussion

The value of thick description

Unlike theories such as social judgment, elaboration likelihood, and uncertainty reduction, the cultural approach to organizations is comprised of minimal theoretical apparatus. There are no flowcharts, continua, or complex equations here, and it is telling that only a half dozen or so terms qualify as “key,” above. The art of ethnography, of course, is in its application, which is why Griffin’s treatment contains so many rich examples. The premises behind the work of Geertz and Pacanowsky are not difficult to master; their achievement is based on their ability to produce thick descriptions of the cultures in question. Be sure your students understand this point as you discuss this chapter.

For purposes of continuity, we suggest that you follow Griffin’s prompt (291) and refer students back to the brief discussion of ethnography and Geertz located in Chapter 1 (19). By doing so, you will ground your discussion firmly in the theoretical distinctions with which A First Look at Communication Theory begins.

In Search of Excellence

In the 1980s, Tom Peters wrote on organizational culture in his books, In Search of Excellence (with Bob Waterman), A Passion for Excellence (with Nancy Austin), and The Pursuit of Wow. More recently, organizational scholars have moved away from Peters’s prescriptive method of identifying excellent organizational traits and his suggestion that organizations should alter their cultures in order to achieve certain virtues. His work is still valuable when discussing organizations’ rituals, stories, and unique ethos and it may serve as a good launching point into a discussion about the critics of Geertz and Pacanowsky who charge that they lack a critical objection to injustices. You might ask students to speculate on where the middle ground lies between being overtly prescriptive and intentionally nonjudgmental. The book In Search of Excellence also spawned a video series available through Enterprise Media and, at the onset of your discussion of organizational culture, a segment from the series might serve useful. Though many of the segments are now outmoded, the segment on 3M’s “invention” of the Post-it® note is still extremely engaging.

William Butler Yeats poem

Incidentally, the effect of Pacanowsky’s narrative critique of the profession is more powerful if students have some knowledge of William Butler Yeats’s magnificent (and concise) poem, “The Second Coming,” which concludes, “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”
Sample Application Log

Brian

The Men’s Glee Club is an organization which has its own culture. The substance of our culture is found in our motto: *fraternitas, integritas, veritas* (that is, brotherhood, integrity, and truth). This substance is played out in our rehearsals, weekly devotional times, planned social events, and informal gatherings. As suggested by the theory, many stories are told to help define the Club. Every year the director talks about how we should have our Spring Banquet somewhere closer to Wheaton instead of having it in downtown Chicago. This is a corporate story since it comes from the “management.” Of course, each year we vote to have it in Chicago, since the cabinet would rather follow tradition than the director’s advice. This is a collegial story because it is “the real story” of the Club. The Spring Banquet is a rite for the Glee Club—a rite of enhancement (celebration of the past year), a rite of passage (the time when next year’s cabinet officially takes over), and a rite of integration (our last chance to grow closer as a group before the end of the school year).

Exercises and Activities

The culture of your school

Because it concerns an organizational culture familiar to all your students, question #1 under Questions to Sharpen Your Focus in the textbook is particularly useful for class discussion. As written, the question encourages readers to identify elements of the actual organizational culture an ethnographer would uncover. In fact, though, prospective students are more likely to be exposed to elements of the organization’s official culture that officers of the admission office have constructed for the purpose of promoting the school. After students have described the culture as they see it, therefore, ask them to compare their construct with the official version contained in the institution’s brochures, catalogs, videotapes, and website. (It would be a good idea to bring specific texts to class.) Ask them if the institution’s effort to mold its culture through publications and public pronouncements is effective. Be sure you touch upon metaphors, stories, and rituals. To enrich the discussion further, ask students to compare the official and actual cultures of your institution to those of other colleges or universities with which they have some familiarity. What are the effects of organizational culture on the lives of students? What happens when official and actual cultures diverge dramatically? We’ve known schools in which serious differences between the two organizational cultures were the source of considerable friction. How are cultural values—both official and actual—successfully communicated? How do institutional cultures change? Intriguing answers to these important questions may arise from your discussion.

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he, too, uses question #1 as a jumping off point for discussion of his college’s culture. He particularly solicits the input of transfer students, who have experienced both his college’s culture and another’s and thus often articulate components of the local culture that have been naturalized by and therefore hidden from native students.
An example of a workplace metaphor

Items #3 and #4 under Questions to Sharpen Your Focus in the textbook encourage readers to analyze family rituals and workplace stories. To enrich these discussions, you can broaden their scope. What stories—corporate, personal, or collegial—characterize their families? What rituals help to capture important cultural components of their places of employment? What metaphors vivify or symbolize both organizational contexts? You may wish to share with your students one of our favorite examples of workplace metaphors. A friend of ours was a manager at a high-tech firm. He was bothered by the metaphorical title given to the space in which employees meet to plan for the future and strategize: the “war room.” Believing that the martial connotations of the appellation were odious and counterproductive, he crafted a memo to his superior suggesting a change. Arguing that the term “war room” suggested a win-lose outlook when the company should be striving for win-win situations with its customers, he proposed several less militaristic alternatives such as Mission Control, the Bridge, the Strategy Room, or the Nerve Center. Initially, he persuaded his boss to go with the first suggestion. What he noticed, though, was that even though the name of the room had officially changed, employees continued to refer to it with the traditional title, the “war room.” And that’s the way things remained. Members of the organizational culture thought of their strategy sessions in terms of battle. Apparently, their identities were at least partially formed in terms of warrior imagery. Thus, my friend’s altruistic attempt to alter his organization’s culture failed. Students in our classes who are familiar with corporate war rooms find such discussion particularly stimulating. When we question the inevitability of the name of the room, they often respond, “But that’s what it is!” Getting them to see that the term is indeed a metaphor and that many corporate cultures conceive of their business—and capitalism in general—as warfare is most enlightening. To prove to the skeptic that corporate planning does not have to be conceived of as preparation for battle, we mention that the executive planning rooms at many institutions of higher education such as San Diego State University are simply called the president’s conference room. (What’s it called at your campus?)

“Slouching towards Chicago”

One of the most intriguing sections of this chapter, it seems to us, is Griffin’s discussion of Pacanowsky’s effort to employ fiction to communicate his results (294-95). Due to space constraints, Griffin presents the passage from “Slouching towards Chicago” with little explanatory analysis. We recommend that you take up this matter with your students. Challenge them to produce some of the values and issues that are communicated about Jack and Radner’s subculture, as Griffin suggests in question #2 under Questions to Sharpen Your Focus in the textbook. Griffin has not included this article in the Second Look section, but you—or the right student—will find the entire piece worthy of careful investigation.
Exercises in culture

Ed McDaniel employs the following exercises when he teaches this chapter:

To increase the relevancy of this chapter, I bring in a variety of literature that focuses on organizational culture. These include management books, articles from business magazines, and clippings from the business section of the local newspapers.

To explain culture I use a “rules of the game” approach. This can be accomplished by displaying a picture of a soccer ball, an American football, and an Australian football, and point out how each has a different set of rules. Then I explain how different cultures provide different rules for living life.

Feature film and television examples

The Firm, a popular film based on the novel by John Grisham, provides an excellent example of a distinct corporate culture that has gone over the edge. This culture’s obsession with control also makes it a good example of Deetz’s critical approach, which is discussed in the following chapter. Brubaker and The Shawshank Redemption provide interesting looks at the organizational cultures of two prisons. The films A Few Good Men and An Officer and a Gentleman provide intriguing looks at organizational cultures within the military. Wall Street presents one perspective on the organizational culture of the financial world. Almost Famous, which we featured in our treatment of social penetration theory, provides an amusing view of the culture of seventies rock bands. Particularly revealing is the metaphor the band and its groupies use to describe the young reporter—“the enemy.” The British television show The Office and the U.S. version of the same title provide rich examples of tensions at the workplace and of organizational culture. Although some of the English humor may be lost on students, we recommend the British original for its wry wit and candid portrayal of the working world.
Further Resources


- As Linda Smircich’s comments suggest, the tension between pragmatically based research and ethnography free of management constraints and agendas is a significant issue in the field of organizational communication. Nick Trujillo’s “Corporate Philosophy and Professional Baseball: (Re)defining the Texas Rangers,” Case Studies in Organizational Communication, ed. Beverly Davenport Sypher (New York: Guilford, 1990), 87-110, exemplifies the tension. Although the article is presented as a scholarly case study of the team, it also functions as a public-relations piece for its management, celebrating the efforts of top officers to alter the corporation’s culture. Trujillo, who coauthored several pieces with Pacanowsky, demonstrates the difficulty of serving two masters. We particularly recommend this piece for those interested in athletic organizations.


Organizational stories

- For discussion of organizational stories, see:

Metaphors and symbols

- For discussion of organizational metaphors and symbols, see:


**Clifford Geertz**

- For recent articles by Geertz, see:


- Similar to Geertz’s landmark piece on Balinese cockfighting, H.L. “Bud” Goodall, Jr. writes about a “poker rally” and the culture of Ferrari owners in his article, “Deep Play in a Poker Rally: A Sunday among the Ferraristi of Long Island,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, 5 (2004): 731-67. In addition to the analysis, Goodall discusses the difficulties associated with narrative ethnography.
Sample Examination Questions

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