



The evolution of organizational culture definitions

The evolution of the definitions of organizational culture within the field of organizational studies is intrinsically linked to the evolution of the theoretical frameworks and the specific ontology and epistemology around them (Chia, 2003).

A functionalist viewpoint would treat organizational culture as a metaphor of the organizational life and would study it just as a variable. This view corresponds more a positivist perspective and would offer managers a potential solutions assuming a direct cause-effect models, where they may be able to ‘fix’ their organizational culture making it more effective: productive and profitable (Martin, 2010).

The functionalist concept of culture that assume organizations and cultures are unproblematic objects of study, respond to a “being-realism” conceptions where reality pre-exist independently of observation (Chia, 2003). This make functionalist to treat culture more as a variable that can be predictable, objective and with – potentially- solutions for managers on how to control employees and other variables to improve the organization performance.

In line with this theoretical view, the Neo-positivist cultural research uses the scientific method to develop and verify the theory derive a hypothesis that can be tested in reality (Martin, 2010). In line with this thinking, Martin (idem) defines culture as a set of important understandings that member of a community share in common.

The second perspective uses a symbolic dynamic approach in which culture is studied more based on the meaning of its forms such as ritual and physical arrangements and, consequently, more focus on the organizational live. Researchers that profess this philosophy review the rituals, symbolic meanings and humor, using qualitative methods including observations as a key tool to capture reality.

Symbolic dynamic uses “becoming-realism” as theoretical foundation and focuses on the process of becoming so that how things come to be, defines what they are (Martin, 2010). Here the focus is more in the process of how we order, learn, codify, and classify our thoughts and perceptions and abstractions.

Manifestations of culture include rituals, stories, rewards, jargon, and physical arrangements. These type of cultural manifestations need interpretive studies of culture to understand its context instead off for looking theory validation.



Within this context, the definition of culture is more dynamic and includes a set of cultural arrangements and manifestation that are shared and aligned, but also includes potential conflict and contradictions. This is more accurate and reflects better our changing and contrasting reality.

As Martin (2002) proposes, we can see some manifestations of culture such as rituals, stories, humor, structures and policies. We can observe products of culture, in the same way we individually observe people behaviors; in the case of culture it refers to the collective set of group manifestation. The group can explicitly reflect this into articulated principles and policies to guide the groups actions toward internal and external stakeholders that are part of their context; but also culture can include some not written ‘rules of the game’; it also influences the competencies displayed by group members including the way they interact among each other; habits of thinking or linguistic paradigms which involve shared meaning, symbols, metaphors and rituals.

Interestingly, and beyond these typical “external” manifestations of a culture, Schein (2010) proposes four deeper structural and essential characteristics of group cultures: structural stability, depth, breadth and patterning or integration. Yukl (2010) also concurs with Schein (2010) when defining culture as a set of shared assumptions, beliefs, and values for the members. This provides a sense of “structural stability” (Schein, 2010), which gives the group a sense of identity. This key aspect helps to understand why culture may be hard to change. Culture, even when it’s a dynamic part of a changing reality, it provides stability, meaning and predictability to the group who shares and forms part of it.

Culture is often an unconscious part of a group, becoming something intangible but at the same time very powerful. We can observe its manifestations (rituals, language, etc.) but not its depth ‘internal’ drivers. And, like in an individual therapeutic process, change is possible until conciseness of those internal drivers are revealed.



The breadth is observed when culture covers all group's functionality and processes, including how the organization deals with its primary tasks, and internal and external operations.

The last concept proposed by Schein (2010), patterning or integration, ties together all the elements into a coherent whole including rituals, climate, values and behaviors. This integration is an essential human need or stability and predictability. Yukl (2010) also agreed that these underlying beliefs and values help members deal with problems of survival in the external environment.

According with Martin (2002), when many types of cultural manifestations are studied (such as in Schein (2010) and Yukl (2010) definitions), this produces a holistic view of a cultural context and is referred as a generalist study of culture, contrasting with more narrow studies that only include one or two manifestations, called specialist type of studies. This "specialist" perspective implies the debatable theoretical assumption that those few manifestations can represent the entire culture.

In summary, a key learning from this brief analysis of several organizational culture definitions, we can conclude that within the field of organizational studies, all is linked to the evolution of the theoretical frameworks and the specific ontology and epistemology around them (Chia, 2003).

References.

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