Organizational Culture: A Review of 1994-2005 AHRD Proceedings

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The purpose of this literature review was to find out how organizational culture has been studied within the Academy of Human Resource Development. We reviewed the Academy Proceedings from 1994 to 2005 to examine how authors defined organizational culture, what research purposes led their studies, and how the research has developed in the 12 year span.

Keywords: Corporate culture, Sub-cultures, Organizational practice

That certain researchers are interested in ‘culture’ … does not mean that they have very much in common.

Alvesson, 2002, p. 3

The study of organizations can be traced to ideas of Socrates and Aristotle in 400 BC and is comprised of various theoretical perspectives on organizational function, structure, and processes. Within these perspectives, the concept of organizational culture has been around for only 25 years but has challenged the dominant view of organizations as “rational-utilitarian institutions whose purpose is to accomplish established goals” (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2005, p. 352). Instead, organizational dynamics, structure, and decisions are viewed to be constructed by its individual members and groups through consensus, conflict, or paradox (Martin, 2002).

In the 1970s, Japan’s phenomenal business success and the decrease in U.S. production moved researchers to re-examine knowledge on organizational management. In Theory Z, Ouchi (1981) suggested a successful Japanese company values its employees and develops a culture of “humanized working conditions” (p. 196) which provides supportive environment, increases employees’ self-esteem, and helps increase productivity. Peters and Waterman (1982) researched sixty-two U.S. businesses and identified market-oriented culture as a key to a successful organization. Deal and Kennedy (1982) popularized the term corporate culture in their Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life. They proposed successful corporations carefully “build and nourish” their culture (p. 5) as it represents “a powerful lever for guiding behavior” (p.15).

As these three works turned into bestsellers, organizational culture became a frequent headline in popular business literature (e.g., Business Week, 1982) and a tool for businesses to increase their competitiveness in the global market (Denison, 1990). Organizational culture became praised for the successes of Black & Decker, Johnson & Johnson, and Apple, for the downfalls of Sears, Bank of America, and General Motors (O’Reilly, 1989), and of failures of...
international mergers and acquisitions, for instance, of the German-American DaimlerChrysler in late 1998 (Kets De Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002). Organizational culture has been viewed as the solution to all problems and “a fad” (Hofstede et al., 1990, p. 286) or “a seductive promise for managers” (Martin, 2002, p. 8). Little understanding of how it works in practice (Alvesson, 2002) and a need for theory development to eliminate the existing “conceptual jungle” (Sackmann, 1991, p. 24) stimulate research of this phenomenon in the fields of management, anthropology, and organizational studies. This led us to wonder what research on organizational culture has been conducted in the field of human resource development (HRD) and how HRD practitioners have used this research.

HRD encompasses four components: individual development, career development, performance management, and organizational development (Gilley, Eggland, & Gilley, 2002). HRD has a multidisciplinary foundation and borrows from management, psychology, and organizational behavior, among other disciplines (Chalofsky, 2004; Hatcher, 2000). For example, organization theory/behavior constitutes a core curriculum content area at 55% of graduate HRD programs in the U.S. (Kuchinke, 2001). Hence, research on how HRD approaches organizational culture can contribute to the discussion of the scope and multidisciplinary nature of the field and its relationship to business and organizational practice. The purpose of this research was to find out how organizational culture has been studied by HRD researchers and to see how this research has informed practice. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How is organizational culture defined?
2. What are the purposes for studying organizational culture?
3. How has the study of organizational culture been developed in the span of 12 years?

Method

Written materials provide “a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs” (Patton, 2002, p. 293). Proceedings of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), “a major professional organization” in the field (McLean, 2003, p. 157), from the first (1994) to the last (2005) volume were searched. The titles, abstracts, keywords, purposes, and research questions were scanned for the following terms: culture, organizational culture, management culture, corporate culture, learning culture, work culture, organizational climate, culture change, organizational change, change management, and sub-culture. Publications from poster sessions, innovative sessions, pre-conferences, and town forums were excluded from the search. Of 1510 publications, 31 (2 %) were selected and content-analyzed. Content analysis is used to make sense of text and identify “core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). The three research questions provided a framework for our search for the emerging themes.

Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of the 31 manuscripts in terms of (a) definitions of organizational culture, (b) research purposes, and (c) development of the research from 1994 to 2005.
Definitions of Organizational Culture

Our analysis of definitions of organizational culture resulted in two categories: an organization-wide culture and sub-cultures within an organization-wide culture. An organization wide culture is one shared culture within the organization; sub-cultures within an organization are groups formed around common professional or social interests. Two papers discussed other types of cultures without defining them as organizational, sub-culture, or occupational culture (see Table 1).

Table 1. Definitions of Organizational Culture: Themes and Sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An organization-wide culture</td>
<td>Shared values, beliefs, behaviors</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context of dominance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business orientation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Force of diverse responses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning culture</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humane culture</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-cultures within an organization-wide culture</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cultures</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>31</td>
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An organization-wide culture. The 24 manuscripts that discussed an organization-wide culture defined it in terms of shared values, assumptions, and behaviors, context of dominance, business orientation, force of diverse responses, learning culture, and humane culture.

Seven authors (e.g., Burton, 2005; Gudgel, Feitler, & Thomas, 1999) incorporated Schein’s (1992, 1999) view on organizational culture that encompasses three levels: artifacts, espoused values, and tacit shared assumptions. Schein (2004) defines organizational culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group 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. 17). Some authors adopted similar definitions. For example, Ardichvili, Cseh, Gaspirashvili, Krisztian, & Nemeskeri (2003) used Denison’s (1990) definition of organizational culture as “a system of values and beliefs that form a foundation of an organization’s management practices” (p. 328); Vasquez-Colina & Reio (2005) utilized Pettigrew’s (1979) definition as “patterns and beliefs, symbols, rituals, values, assumptions that evolve and are shared by the members of the organization” (p. 466).

The 11 manuscripts that did not provide a definition discussed organizational culture in terms of (a) a context of dominance, (b) a business orientation, (c) a force of diverse responses, (d) learning culture, and (e) humane culture.

Four manuscripts explored organizational culture as a context of dominance in terms of gender (Biswas & Dick, 1996; McDonald & Hite, 1997) and race/gender (Alfred, 1999; Bierema, 1994). Biswas and Dick (1996) studied how male-dominated culture of a large British Police Constabulary combined with HRM employee development practices created “an exclusionary culture” (p. 641) that hindered professional development of female
employees. McDonald and Hite (1997) explored whether male-dominated cultures of emergency services organizations, which they called “gender skewed cultures” (p. 739), created barriers for female employees’ participation in single-sex learning events. White male-dominated organizational culture was also viewed as an obstacle for development and function of executive business women (Bierema, 1994) and for career development of African American female university faculty Alfred (1999).

Three authors discussed organizational culture in terms of a business orientation. Connell, Papke, Stanton, and Wise (2003) researched factors that affected organizational transformation from “an order-taking/operational culture to a sales-and-service culture” (p. 531) or “high-performance sales culture” (p. 530). In the study of TQM, organizational change, and continuous improvement, Walton and Basra (2001) described organizational culture shift from operations or product oriented to customer and market oriented.

Pierson and Brooks (1994) and Turnbull (2001) found organizational culture change initiatives produce diverse and unplanned impact on employees. In Pierson and Brooks’ study, the implementation of such initiative produced confusion and lack on consensus about the purpose of the change and the vision, mission, and strategy of the organization among individual employees in managerial and non-managerial positions and between departments. “The diversity within the organization made rational change nearly impossible” (p. 144). Turnbull found managers’ emotional responses “invoked by” the change program (e.g., mistrust, risk avoidance) were often times opposite to those “designed into” the program (e.g., trust, risk-taking [paper 28-2]).

Maria and Watkins (2001) examined employee perceptions of organizational innovation and learning culture of employees in Malaysian public organizations. Learning culture was viewed as a part of learning organization and “a prerequisite for successful organizational change” (paper 36-1). Perceptions of learning culture were measured on the basis of seven components, including empowerment, a system of sharing, and collaboration.

Chalofsky and Griffin (2005) proposed a humane organizational culture which creates employee-friendly environment by supporting work-life balance for employees. Such organizations value employees and acknowledge all aspects of their lives, which leads to high employee commitment and builds work community.

Sub-cultures within an organization-wide culture. Five manuscripts discussed the existence of sub-cultures within an organization-wide culture. The relationships between the former and the latter were characterized from harmonic (Powell, 1997) to disenfranchised (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1994). Powell (1997) adopted Schein’s (1990) definition of organizational culture and then argued that organizational culture “often develops sub-cultures which, in turn, create dissonance and disharmony. Each sub-culture develops its own communication network, over time, evolves into a unique subset of norms, assumptions and behaviors” (paper 6-1). Distances between a sub-culture and the main culture decrease organizational effectiveness; therefore, organization-wide culture aims to reduce such distances and build harmony within the organization. Wilensky and Hansen (2001) did not define organizational culture but explained that it consists of “distant groupings”, i.e. occupational subcultures (paper 10-1). Though members of occupational subcultures may not work together on a daily basis, they share beliefs, build professional relationships, and influence each other. Differences between occupational sub-cultures may result in dissonance, so organizations should strive for the creation of alignment among them. For Bunch (2001) organizational culture “is made up of subcultures with different levels of power, status, and influence (Sackman, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993) that emerge from interactions centered around various categories including profession, department, hierarchical level, and line or staff function” (paper 39-2). Bunch, defines organizational culture as a system of shared beliefs, values, assumptions, and behaviors and notes that differences among subcultures may
result in “conflict and power struggle.” Turnbull and Edwards (2005) focused on tensions between academic and market/administration subcultures within a university context. Achieving a balance between these subcultures required finding new and effective leadership strategies. Hansen and Kahnweiler (1994) suggest that “occupational cultures form around the belief that members have the exclusive right to perform a given set of interrelated tasks” (p. 72) and reject the idea of a harmonic organizational culture. Subcultures can co-exist as “an integrated cultural confederation” only when an organization “acknowledges differences and builds upon similarities” (p. 77).

Other types of culture. The remaining two papers, Montesino (2000) explored how managerial culture was influenced by political culture in the Dominican Republic. The author seemed to focus on the change in managerial culture across the nation but did not define it as an occupational culture or subculture and its relationship to organization-wide culture or subcultures. Similarly, Williams, Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2002) researched how organizational culture in the departments influence HRD faculty productivity. Although the problem was situated in the university context, department culture was not approached as a subculture within a university-wide organizational culture or as an HRD occupational culture.

Research Purposes
Two purposes emerged for studying organizational culture which can be categorized as relational and exploratory. The relational purpose links organizational culture to internal and external organizational factors or variables. The exploratory purpose examines the phenomenon of organizational culture or its interpretations (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Purpose</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Organizational practices</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee characteristics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External factors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Culture change</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation of organizational culture</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relational. Twenty-four manuscripts (77.4%) had a relational purpose. Two subcategories, internal and external factors, exist under relational purpose. Internal factors are (a) organizational practices and (b) employee characteristics. External factors included societal values and political culture.

Fourteen manuscripts linked organizational culture to organizational practices. Four studies examined the relationship between organizational culture and organizational innovation or change. For example, Bates and Khasawneh’s (2004) “objective was to test the ability of learning organization culture to account for variance in learning transfer climate and subsequent organizational innovation, and to examine the role of learning transfer climate as a mediator between learning organization culture and innovation” (p. 513). Examples of similar purposes include linking organizational culture to knowledge management (Bennett, 2005; Zheng, 2005), training effectiveness (Bunch, 2001), employee selection (Bowman & Harada, 2003), information sharing (Powell, 1997), company ownership (Gudgel et al., 1999), and leadership development (Hasler, 2005).

Seven authors aimed to explore the connection between organizational culture and employee emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. For instance, Turnbull (2001) researched the
effect of a culture change program on employee beliefs, values, and self identity. The program invoked such unplanned feelings as frustration, mistrust, embarrassment, or fear to be manipulated. Vasquez-Colina & Reio (2005) hypothesized that organizational culture, along with employee demographic variables, affected their perceived job performance. Maria and Watkins (2001) investigated whether employee perceptions of learning culture and innovation affect their use of innovation and found that culture explains “31.5% of the variance in the use of innovation” (paper 36-1).

Three manuscripts examined relationships between organizational culture and external factors. Ardichvili et al. (2003) and Hansen and Headly (1997) researched the relationships between organizational culture and societal values. Montesino (2001) explored the effect of political culture on managerial culture in the Dominican Republic.

**Exploratory.** Seven manuscripts aimed to explore (a) organizational culture or sub-sub-culture, (b) organizational culture change process, (d) meaning of organizational culture to employees. Manuscripts discussed components of a humane organizational culture (Chalofsky & Griffin; 2005) and occupational sub-cultures of executives and HRD professionals (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1994; Wilensky & Hansen, 2001). To examine organizational culture change, ARL INQUIRY (1996) addressed social processes of development and learning. Bierema (1994) and Alfred (1999) explored how women interpreted and adjusted to male-dominated white organizational culture.

**Development of Research on Organizational Culture between 1994 and 2005**

Our examination of the manuscripts across the 12 year span revealed several observations. Of 31 manuscripts, as many as four papers were published each year between 1994 and 2004 (some years no papers were published) and seven (22.6%) were published in 2005. While papers on organizational culture seem to be consistently present, the numbers are less than might be expected for the degree of impact organizational culture could have on the four components of HRD: individual development, career development, performance management, and organizational development (Gilley, Eggland, & Gilley, 2002). Furthermore, most themes were observed in manuscripts across the 12 year span; however, the four manuscripts that defined organizational culture as a context of dominance and the two that focused on employees’ interpretation of culture were published before 1999. At the same time, all seven manuscripts published in 2005 reflect the preferred definition (one organization-wide culture) and the preferred research purpose (relational) among the rest of 31 publications. Five of them discussed organization-wide culture defined from Schein’s (1990) perspective as a set of shared assumptions, values, and behaviors. Six of them were done for relational purposes: four related organizational culture to organizational practices and two other to employee characteristics.

**Discussion**

The low number of manuscripts indicates that organizational culture is not a primary research interest within the AHRD. This lack of interest is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, organizational culture has been a center of attention and remains a controversy in business and academic literature and practice cites. For example, applied/organizational ethnographies, which examining issues relevant to organizational culture, are being noticed by business and industry. Research in those fields has led to the first Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference held in November 2005 and hosted by the Microsoft Corporation and fully sponsored by other businesses. Second, organization theory/behavior constitutes a core curriculum content area at over a half of graduate HRD programs in the country (Kuchinke,
Most authors defined organizational culture as one organization-wide phenomenon, which consists of a set of shared assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors, and can be related to other organizational factors to improve employee productivity, learning, or organizational effectiveness. The organizations are characterized as unified, coherent, consistent, and lacking ambiguity or conflict (Martin, 2002). Such research is conducted from the traditional objectivist, pragmatic, rational paradigm: an organization has culture (Alvesson, 2002, p. 24); culture is “a variable” which can be built to be strong and unique (Smircich, 1983, p. 439). Borrowing from Habermas, Alvesson (2002) calls such interest in studying culture technical since the research is narrowed to the mere examination of casual relationships between organizational culture and organizational performance.

The popularity of this view on organizational culture within the Academy reflects the similar trend in other academic fields and business practice (Martin, 2002) but requires caution. First, the dominant themes that emerged in our study almost mirror the assumptions about organizational culture suggested over 40 years ago by Blake and Mounton (1964) who argued for a culture which:

1. promotes and sustains efficient performance of highest quality,
2. fosters and utilizes creativity,
3. stimulates enthusiasm for effort, experimentation, innovation and change,
4. takes educational advantage from interaction situations and
5. looks for and finds new challenges.

Therefore, the new ideas developed by social sciences (e.g., constructivism, critical theory, postmodernism, feminist theory) were rarely incorporated into the AHRD research. For example, only four manuscripts incorporated race and/or gender and approached culture as a context of dominance. Only two others cautioned against the taken-for-granted success and desirability of culture change initiatives and pointed to the diverse response and emotional struggle among the involved employees. A priori view of organizational culture as beneficial for all stakeholders overshadows, hides, and dismisses anything less clear and orderly or undoubtedly negative in an organization (Alvesson, 2002). Such organizational culture seeks uniformity of employees’ behaviors and attitudes and for minimization or elimination of differences as inconvenient (Koot et al., 1996). Diversity and plurality becomes valued as long as “it offers a direct, visible and measurable added value” and “does not interfere with current organizational practices” (Sabelis, 2004, p. 295).

Second, the dominant view equates organizational culture to the management ideology, while values, norms and behaviors promoted by top management represent only a fraction of organizational culture (Alvesson, 2002). Organizational culture becomes “an instrument for the universalization of managerial interests, the suppression of conflicting interests and the perpetuation of corporate and societal hegemony” (Ogbor, 2001, p. 591). By ‘managing’ organizational culture, organizations control the non-rational behaviors, coerce, and erase employee identity and substitute it with one desired by management, and thus limiting employee creativity and autonomy (Ogbor, 2001).

The efforts to relate organizational culture to organizational success result in “the trivialization of organizational culture (...) - a tendency to emphasize mainly the superficial aspects of these selected parts of organizational culture” (Alvesson, 2002, p. 44). This tendency is “a social engineering or social physics approach to organizational life” (Smircich, 1985, p. 59). Such trivialization of organizational culture might also undermine the integrity of research. For example, any cultural manifestation found can be dangerously attributed to organizational culture, ignoring other influences (e.g., industry or local culture). Reduction of
organizational culture to a practical tool appealing to managers might promise fast results but can also limit its potential and even mislead (Alvesson, 2002).

Conclusions and Implications

HRD research of organizational culture is limited to the rational managerial perspective on culture, employees, and organization. This limitation can be explained by the HRD focus on performance improvement and some researchers’ educational and work background in business. A diversity of views on organizational culture is needed to better understand organizational culture and its contribution to HRD practice, to avoid trivialization of organizational culture, and to increase rigor of research. Research on organizational culture from other disciplines can help HRD professionals critically examine their views on and knowledge of the phenomenon. HRD professionals can also collaborate with researchers and practitioners from fields other than business and HRD. Existing research within HRD on changes in organizations and work practices can also help re-define the concept of an organization and how the elements of culture informs that concept.

References


