# Organizational Culture:
# A Literature Review of the AHRD 1994-2005 Proceedings

Maria S. Plakhotnik and Tonette S. Rocco
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** The purpose of this literature review was to find out how organizational culture has been studied within the Academy of Human Resource Development from 1994 to 2005 by examining how authors defined organizational culture and their research purposes.

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. Ouchi (1981), Peters and Waterman (1982), and Deal and Kennedy (1982) explored how organizational culture contributes to business success. As their works turned into bestsellers, organizational culture became a frequent headline in popular business literature 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 and Apple or for the downfalls of Sears and General Motors (O'Reilly, 1989).

Little understanding of how it works in practice (Alvesson, 2002) and a need for theory development stimulate research of this phenomenon in the fields of management, anthropology, and organizational studies. These and other disciplines (e.g., psychology, organizational behavior) constitute a multidisciplinary foundation of human resource development (HRD) (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). This led us to wonder what research on organizational culture has been conducted in the field of HRD. Such investigation 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. Two questions guided the study: (a) How is organizational culture defined? and (b) What are the purposes for studying organizational culture?

## 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 terms *culture*, *organizational*

*culture*, *management culture*, *corporate culture*, *learning culture*, *work culture*, *organizational climate*, *culture change*, *organizational change*, *change management*, and *sub-culture*. 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 two 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 and (b) research purposes.

*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 an organization-wide culture, sub-culture, or occupational culture.

*An organization-wide culture.* The 23 manuscripts that discussed an organization-wide culture defined it in terms of (a) shared values, assumptions, and behaviors, (b) context of dominance, (c) business orientation, (d) force of diverse responses, (e) learning culture, and (f) humane culture. Of thirteen authors who defined culture in terms of shared values, assumptions, and behaviors, seven used Schein's (2004) view on 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" (p. 17). Other authors adopted similar definitions, for example, Pettigrew's (1979) definition of organizational culture as "patterns and beliefs, symbols, rituals, values, assumptions that evolve and are shared by the members of the organization" (p. 466).

Four manuscripts explored culture as a context of dominance in terms of gender and race/gender. 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. 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 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 as a shift from operations or product oriented to customer and market oriented.

Three found organizational culture change initiatives produce a diverse and unplanned impact on employees. Such initiatives can produce confusion and lack of consensus about the purpose of the change and the vision, mission, and strategy of the organization among employees and departments (Pierson & Brooks, 1994). Managers' emotional responses "invoked by" the program can often contradict those "designed into" the program (Turnbull, 2001, paper 28-2).

Learning culture was viewed as a part of learning organization and "a prerequisite for successful organizational change" (Maria & Watkins, 2001, paper 36-1). Perceptions of learning culture were measured on the basis of seven components, including empowerment, a system of

sharing, and collaboration. A humane organizational culture creates employee-friendly environment by supporting work-life balance for employees (Chalofsky & Griffin, 2005).

*Sub-cultures within an organization-wide culture.* Five manuscripts discussed sub-cultures within an organization-wide culture and characterized the relationships between the former and the latter from harmonic to disenfranchised. For example, Powell (1997) argued that organizational culture "often develops sub-cultures which, in turn, create dissonance and disharmony" (paper 6-1). Distances between a sub-culture and the main culture decrease organizational effectiveness, so organization-wide culture aims to reduce such distances and build harmony within the organization. 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. Sub-cultures can co-exist as "an integrated cultural confederation" only when an organization "acknowledges differences and builds upon similarities" (p. 77).

*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.

*Relational.* Twenty-four manuscripts (77.4%) had a relational purpose. Two sub-categories, internal and external factors, exist under relational purpose. Internal factors are organizational practices and 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 (2004) tested "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, training effectiveness, employee selection, information sharing, and company ownership.

Seven authors connected 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. Maria and Watkins (2001) investigated whether employee perceptions of learning culture and innovation affect their use of innovation.

Three other manuscripts examined relationships between organizational culture and external factors. For instance, Montesino (2001) explored the effect of political culture on managerial culture in the Dominican Republic.

*Exploratory.* Seven manuscripts had exploratory purpose and aimed to examine (a) organizational culture or sub-sub-culture, (b) organizational culture change process, and (c) 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). Bierema (1994) and Alfred (1999) explored how women interpreted and adjusted to a male-dominated White organizational culture.

## 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 remains one of the central issues in academic literature and managerial practice. For example, research of organizational culture in applied/organizational ethnography has led to the first *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference* in 2005, hosted by the Microsoft Corporation and fully sponsored by other businesses. Second, organization theory/behavior constitutes a core curriculum area at over a half of graduate HRD programs (Kuchinke, 2001). The dissonance between what is taught and what is researched might reflect the novelty of the organizational culture perspective or skepticism about its value for HRD.

Most authors defined organizational culture as one shared organization-wide phenomenon that can be related to other organizational factors to improve employee productivity and organizational effectiveness. Such research is conducted from the traditional objectivist, pragmatic, rational paradigm: an organization *has* culture (Alvesson, 2002); 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 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 in the early 1980s.Therefore, the new ideas developed by social sciences (e.g., critical theory, feminist theory) were rarely incorporated into the AHRD research. For example, only four manuscripts incorporated race and/or gender approaching culture as a context of dominance.

Second, the dominant view equates organizational culture to the management ideology, while values and behaviors promoted by management represent only a fraction of 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" culture, organizations control the non-rational behaviors and erase employee identity, substituting it with one desired by management (Ogbor, 2001). A priori view of organizational culture as beneficial for all stakeholders hides and dismisses anything less clear and orderly in an organization. The efforts to relate culture to organizational success trivialize the phenomenon (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 inform that concept.

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