The Organizational Culture Perspective

J. Steven Ott
University of Maine
Orono, Maine

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CHAPTER 5

Methodological Approaches for Studying Organizational Culture

This and the remaining chapters address many of the questions posed at the end of Chapter 4. For example, given the complexities of organizational culture, how does one go about identifying or otherwise conducting research in organizational culture? What should be deciphered? What research strategies should be used? Does, in fact, the process of investigating an organizational culture change it or destroy it (Herbert, 1987). These are some of the subjects of Chapter 5.

It is time to assess the applicability of different approaches, tools, and methods for researching, identifying, deciphering or explaining organizational culture, for different purposes and under different circumstances. Chapter 5 begins with an analysis of the very substantial problems associated with organizational culture research. Some research needs, issues, and appropriate data collection methodologies are then reviewed for each level of organizational culture. The chapter concludes with an attempt to bridge between competing research paradigms using analytical goals as the link.

For the sake of brevity, the words *research, identify, study,* and *decipher* are used interchangeably. Words such as *explain* and *predict* have more specific implications, so their meanings are explained in the context of their use. *Measure* is carefully excluded from the lexicon of this book.

DISENCHANTMENT WITH TRADITIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH METHODS

Students of organizational culture almost universally reject the logical-positivist quasi-experimental designs and approaches (Cook & Campbell, 1979, pp. 10–14) that have dominated organization theory research for more than a decade (Van Maanen 1982a). Van Maanen cites numerous reasons for the growing disenchantment with quantitative quasi-experimental designs—the backbone of the research methods of the systems and "modern" structural schools.[1] They include:

> the relatively trivial amounts of explained variance, the lack of comparability across studies, the failure to achieve much predictive validity, the high level of technical and notational sophistication rendering many research publications incomprehensible. . . and the causal complexity of multivariate analysis, which. . . makes change-oriented actions difficult to contemplate (p. 13).

Goodall's (1984) study of the literature on research in organizational communication identified a body of criticisms suggesting that

> research done in the great scientific traditions tend to encourage simplistic, reductionist assumptions and explanations about human symbol-using/abusing, usually at the expense of more complex interpretive possibilities. . . . these critiques further suggest the world according to the scientific explanations of organizational behavior is, at best, incomplete, and at worst a-logical or ill-equipped to deal with the territory it purports to explain (p. 135).

Dissatisfaction with quasi-experimental designs for studying organizations is not recent; nevertheless, the organizational culture perspective has had difficulty finding adequate replacements for them. Moreover, most of the newer, mostly qualitative research methods have substantial validity, reliability, and general usefulness problems. Just as the organizational culture perspective is encountering problems of youthfulness,[2] so also are its favored research approaches.

Many of the research methods being used by students of organizational culture have warranted challenges from several points of view. First, from the logical-positivist quasi-experimental perspective, qualitative methods are not valid research and, tautologously, cannot yield valid or reliable results. Second, because there is no consensus within the organizational culture perspective about what organizational culture is, what constitutes it, and what the organizational culture perspective can reasonably expect to accomplish, it is impossible to have agreement on its research methodologies. Alternative methods for studying organizational culture must be found.

If organizational culture is defined as espoused beliefs and val-

[1] See Chapter 6 for discussions of "schools."
[2] See Chapter 1.

ues, myriad straightforward research tools are available for use from the human relations school. They include questionnaires, inventories, structured and unstructured individual and group interviews, and on and on. Many of these methods are amenable to quasi-experimental designs. Conversely, if organizational culture is defined as basic underlying assumptions, and if significant differences sometimes exist between espoused values and values-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1978), then methods using questionnaires and inventories will yield misleading results. Instead, longitudinal qualitative research methods are called for, such as participant observation from the ethnographic paradigms (Sanday 1979, 1983) or from the clinician perspective (Schein 1984).

Researcher objectivity is a problematic issue for organizational research in general and organizational culture research in particular. The logical-positivists assume that researchers will (*must*) strive to be independent, neutral, dispassionate seekers of scientifically verifiable truths (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Experimental and quasi-experimental designs are protections against researcher-induced biases, such as values, hopes, feelings, preferences, and perceptions.

Nevertheless, detached objectivity in organizational research is largely a myth, no matter who conducts it. Even if one diligently seeks such objectivity, the very use of logical-positivist quasi-experimental research designs predetermines what will be looked for; the research design and instruments used; and, to a great extent, what will be found and concluded. Moreover, reflect on the "even if" assumption in the prior sentence. Since when are researchers devoid of professional hopes, emotions, and preconceptions? Why does the donning of a researcher's hat turn a person into a neutral, detached seeker of knowledge? Schools of organization theory are professional communities with shared perspectives, norms, beliefs, values, preferences, and assumptions. *Their members seek truths within the parameters of their school's perspective.* Van Maanen (1982a) describes organizational research as "inherently a social and cultural process with deeply rooted moral, political, and personal overtones" (p. 14). The assumption of researcher objectivity is a "rational" perspective—it comes from the left side of Figure 6–2 on page 145. Martin (1982a) describes that perspective of organizational research as a statement of *what should be rather than what actually happens.* Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) "garbage can model" much more accurately describes how most organizational research truly is conducted.

All organizational research involves "judgment calls. . . . decisions (some big, some small, but all necessary and consequential) that must be made without the benefit of a fixed, 'objective' rule that one can apply with precision" (McGrath, 1982, p. 13). The cumulative effects of judgment calls often predetermine the outcomes of research (p. 13). Moreover, judgment calls tend to be made in accord with a researcher's preconceptions, hopes, values, and perceptions. Thus, organizational culture research tends to yield results that support and substantiate the researcher's perspective of organizational culture.[3] This is an unfortunate reality—but a reality nevertheless. Yet the problem is not unique to organizational culture research or even to qualitative methodologies. It is universal to research, particularly organizational research, logical-positivist as well as qualitative.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

The phrase *qualitative research* has been woven into the discussion without explanation. What is it? Van Maanen's (1979, 1983a) description sounds painfully familiar: "The label qualitative methods has no precise meaning in any of the social sciences" (p. 9). In general, however, *qualitative research* describes an umbrella of interpretive techniques for "coming to terms with the meaning, not the frequency" (p. 9) of events or phenomena.[4] Qualitative research methods are best suited for seeking a thorough description within a limited sphere, such as deciphering the basic assumptions of one organization's culture. They are not applicable, however, for purposes such as describing a population from a sample or identifying covariance between variables (as, for example, between an artifact and an ideology).

Formally, qualitative research methods are axiomatic-like principles a researcher carries around with him or her; and the primary principle of qualitative organizational research is "firsthand inspection of ongoing organizational life (Van Maanen 1982a, p. 16). Four other of Van Maanen's principles are important for this analysis:[5]

- Analytic induction. Patterns and generalizations are built from specific data. Data are not used to confirm or test preexisting theories.
- Proximity. Events and things must be witnessed firsthand. Secondhand accounts are not valid data. Thus, qualitative research methods do not include interviews, questionnaires, and surveys.

[3] Within relatively narrow limits.

[4] *Qualitative methods* also sometimes means the use of nonquantitative data analysis methods, as in Miles and Huberman's (1984) *Qualitative Data Analysis*.

[5] With my comments added.

- Ordinary behavior. Qualitative research is interested in routine, uninterrupted activities. Disruptions of routines, including those caused by research activities, distort data and are to be avoided. Data collection must be unobtrusive.
- Descriptive focus. The first priority for qualitative research is to describe what is going on in a given place at a certain time. This purpose is more important than explaining or predicting. Obviously, a good description should help make sense out of what is described; but a good description is a prerequisite for making sense—it must come first (Van Maanen, 1982a, p. 16).

Very few techniques of social science research satisfy all of these principles. Even such well-known semiethnographic studies as Whyte's (cited in Homans 1950, ch. 7) of the Norton Street Gang; Clark's (1970) of three distinctive colleges; and Pettigrew's (1979, 1983) of a British boarding school—all violate at least one of these criteria. Van Maanen's (1982b) own methodology for studying police behavior jeopardizes his principle of "ordinary behavior." By these standards, only participant observation with the observer (or the observer's identity) concealed (Goffman, 1961; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter 1956) and investigations of organizational archives fully satisfy the qualitative data collection principles or standards.

Participant observation and archival searches are, in fact, fundamental data-gathering tools of qualitative organizational research. One (or both) method(s) is used in most current studies. For practical and ethical reasons, the researcher's identity is concealed only rarely. In order to help negate data distortions caused by the entry and presence of a researcher, Wolcott (1975) and others argue that ethnographic studies in organizations should span at least a full year. Thus, qualitative research studies usually take a long time to complete. Not many organizations can afford to wait months or years just to find out what their organizational culture is.

Use of Multiple Research Methods or "Triangulation"

Several recent studies have supplemented participant observation and archival searches with a variety of somewhat qualitative research methods that generally satisfy the spirit if not the letter of Van Maanen's (1982a) principles (to varying degrees). A few examples include time-lapsed videotaping and photographing of peoples' activities (Dabbs, 1982); interviewing and content analyzing newspaper and business journal articles (Martin & Siehl, 1983) and speeches (Pettigrew, 1979, 1983); intentionally stimulating organizations to react (to a researcher-initiated stimulus), then observing organizational behavior (Salancik, 1979, 1983); and sequences of verbal interchanges, feedback sessions, and joint client-researcher elaborations of initial, tentative findings (Schein, 1984; 1985).

A very small number of organizational culture research efforts have combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies. One of the best of these is Siehl and Martin's (1984) two-phased investigation of organizational culture transmittal and learning processes.

The fact that multiple research methods are gaining in use probably is more important than the specific techniques selected. Clearly, designs that utilize multiple methods are becoming the hallmark of organizational culture research. The jargon is *to triangulate*, meaning to come at the same phenomenon from different angles, using several research tools (or with several researchers using the same tools), much like sailors fix their position at sea by triangulating on stars. Triangulation increases the richness and the reliability of qualitative organizational research (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Crano, 1981; Greene & McClintock, 1985; McClintock & Greene, 1985).

Summary

The most important problems associated with studying organizational culture are:

- Because people cannot agree about what organizational culture is, they also cannot agree what should be identified or how to go about it.
- Without consensus on what organizational culture is, research in organizational culture has had difficulty advancing beyond merely identifying to explaining, predicting, and using it. Very few attempts have been made to address issues such as relationships between the content of a culture and the culture's pervasiveness; extent of member socialization; presence of different types of subcultures; and patterns of behavior (such as decision strategies and performance levels).
- Most organizational culture studies have used (and continue to use) qualitative or near-qualitative rather than quantitative research methods. Qualitative methods are excellent for describing and explaining but not for predicting and generalizing.
- Qualitative research methods are controversial enough in themselves; but Schein (1985) complicates the picture even further. He uses Lewin (1958) to support his view that ethnographic

approaches to qualitative research *cannot* yield accurate information about organizational culture. Valid data can only be obtained through a *clinical perspective. The researcher must be a helper* (pp. 21–22).

- The parameters of the organizational culture perspective are not clearly established, so that the usefulness limits of organizational culture research are not known. For some areas of research interest (for example, results of conflicts between two subcultures), explanatory and predictive research from a different perspective of organization theory, such as the power and politics perspective (Shafritz & Ott, 1987, ch. V), may be able to provide better answers.
- Organizational culture research has relied on qualitative research methods for several reasons. First, it is almost impossible to use quantitative methods to study things such as forgotten basic assumptions. Second, immature scientific perspectives tend to use inductive research designs, and inductive designs in the social sciences tend to be qualitative. Qualitative methods do not meet logical-positivist quasi-experimental research design standards for ensuring validity and reliability. For all practical purposes, qualitative studies can only seldom be replicated, and confidence limits cannot be established for their findings. Thus, by tautology, almost all organizational culture research is not valid by logical-positivist standards. If studies are not valid and confidence levels are not known, they are not worth doing.
- Most qualitative research efforts take many months or even years to complete. When information about organizational culture is needed quickly—such as for input to strategy decisions—qualitative methods cannot produce. Moreover, they are expensive to conduct.
- The use of more easily measured proxy constructs such as norms, values, and beliefs for the more ethereal cultural constructs like basic underlying assumptions would solve several organizational culture research problems. Quantitative procedures and instruments such as statistical sampling, normed instruments, and quantitative data analysis techniques could be employed. Thus, the research methods could at least approximate quasi-experimental designs. As it takes less time to collect data, interpret them and produce results, research costs could be reduced. Unfortunately, there is no existing body of knowledge about when norms, beliefs, and values coincide (and fail to coincide) with basic underlying cultural

assumptions; so they cannot be used as proxy indicators with any confidence.

- For those of the logical-positivist persuasion, the lack of researcher objectivity and methodological safeguards against such nonobjectivity are very serious problems. Organizational culture researchers defend themselves and their methods by admitting they are not (and cannot be) neutrally objective (Van Maanen, 1982b, p. 115) and countercharge that *neutral objective research is not conducted within any school of organizational theory*. They see themselves as at least facing up to the problem honestly—but not satisfactorily solving it.

SOME METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Clearly, organizational culture research faces monumental methodological problems—and it probably will take years for some of them to be solved. On the other hand, a few of its problems appear to be resolvable now. This is the goal of Chapter 5. To start, the typologies of organizational culture (Figures 3–3 and 3–4 on pages 62 and 63) provide useful answers about what can and should be studied. Second, as is true of research in any social science, tradeoffs always can be made between the duration and costs of research and the confidence in results. For example, if information is needed quickly, methods can be selected that yield fast results but usually with low confidence levels (and vice versa). If confidence level requirements are not high, methods can be selected to minimize research costs and duration (and vice versa).

The important assumption I make here is that *the selection of research methods should be determined by how quickly results are needed and how they will be used.* In practice, these determinants will usually dictate the choice of a research design and amount of confidence that can be placed in results. With this assumption clearly stated, we proceed now to look at some alternative strategies and methods for studying organizational culture.

It should be evident that there is no one best way to study organizational culture. In fact, there probably is no single best way to study anything. Research strategies and methods must be appropriate to what is being studied (*the construct*) and the reasons why the research is being conducted (*intended uses for the results*). Even if organizational theorists cannot agree about what organizational culture is, the organizational investigator still must make decisions. For example, the approach used by a company to study the limits its own basic underlying assumptions impose on its future marketing strategies should not be the same as the methods used by a university-based theorist who wants to know if material artifacts can be used to predict the relative impacts of different sources of organizational culture. These two (hypothetical) research purposes require designs that can measure different cultural constructs, satisfy different confidence requirements, and produce results more or less rapidly.

The next few sections of this chapter analyze alternative research approaches and data sources that can be used to study elements in different levels of organizational culture. The focus is on data collection methods and sources rather than analytical techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The levels of organizational culture are those presented in Figures 3–3 and 3–4. Some of my own experiences with a few of them are woven into the discussions. A reminder: Every method and source has advantages and disadvantages, so multiple research techniques should always be used to triangulate.

Artifacts: Level 1A of Organizational Culture

Wandering Around Looking at Physical Settings. Often quite a bit can be surmised quickly about an organization's culture simply by looking around at its material artifacts. Although Fritz Steele's (1973) book, *Physical Settings and Organization Development,* was not written from an organizational culture perspective, his listing of "technophysical surroundings" (p. 10) is useful for spotting clues about culture. Steele suggests looking at the exterior setting (campus-type lawns or industrial buildings); the layout of walls and walkways; enclosing structures (walls, partitions, screens, windows, and plants); things in the immediate work areas (furniture, decorations, filing cabinets, and machines); the quality of light and noise; and relative placement of things (a secretary's desk in relation to the boss's) (p. 10).

Harold Seidman (1980) observed:

> one only has to walk into the ancient [U.S.] Treasury Department building adjoining the White House to sense the atmosphere of a conservative financial institution. The money cage at the main entryway, the gilt pilasters, the gold-framed portraits on the walls, all reinforce the Treasury "image" (p. 134).

The physical facilities at Scenic Mountain State College, a small rural state college, communicate an unmistakable message about the College's identity and its compatibility with the socioeconomic status of the area. No structure on campus has even a slightly pretentious air. All buildings were designed solely for functionality. There are no arches, statues, fountains, wood, or stone trim. Even the historic, old administrative building, constructed in the 1890s, looks like an oversized country schoolhouse. Administrative offices are homey rather than officious, imposing, or "academic." Walls painted in neutral (bland) tones are dotted with old pictures of the campus, nearby farmhouses, and country schools. Nobody who goes on the campus has to wonder about Scenic Mountain State College's self-image, identity, or mission.

With increasing frequency, however, organizations are deliberately engineering their physical settings to communicate messages. Space designers are being used to create desired images. Yet even consciously engineered settings can provide important clues. The Mountain State Chapter needed larger offices at the time John Thomas became president. He proposed moving to a vacant suite of plush executive offices on the top floor of a nearby bank building. The offices were available quite inexpensively. Several members of the Board of Directors convinced him that plush offices would communicate a damaging symbolic message to volunteers and small donors, regardless of their actual cost. Instead, unpretentious basement offices were found in an industrial/commercial neighborhood. The setting was engineered to maintain a low-budget image.

When looking around, what isn't visible often is as important as what is seen. Although Martin and Siehl (1983) were writing about organizational stories rather than material artifacts, their observation is pertinent to our subject here.

> Students of Japanese corporate cultures have noted the difficulty of interpreting cultural phenomena. To appreciate the shape and placement of a rock in a Japanese garden, the educated viewer focuses on the empty spaces around the rock. Similarly, the process of "reading" the content of a culture requires attention to disruptions and to what is absent or unsaid (p. 59).

By themselves, physical settings do not provide reliable information about organizational culture. Without the benefit of other sources of information, an investigator can not differentiate between artifacts-as-symbols and merely signs. It is very difficult to know when to regard a material artifact seriously. Would an observer with no other information about the Mountain State Chapter infer the symbolism of the computer being partially covered with old posters and styrofoam coffee cups in the back of the Board of Directors' meeting room?

On the other hand, material artifacts, just as physical settings, do perform useful research functions. First, as has been mentioned, they provide quick clues about cultural patterns which then can be investigated more thoroughly with other more sensitive or reliable methods. They can help an investigator get started by pointing out potentially fruitful directions. Second, they can help establish the validity of cultural patterns as they begin to emerge from other data collection activities. For example, if interviewing indicates that an organization is loose, informal, freewheeling, interactive, and not status-conscious, then the size, layout, and access routes to work areas should reflect the culture. If instead the physical setting looks more like the U.S. Treasury Department, the investigator knows that more digging is needed to identify reasons for the incongruities.

Rummaging Through Archives and Other Records. An organization's historical records contain all sorts of invaluable information about organizational culture. Archives can help a researcher associate seemingly unrelated events—for example, by chronologically sequencing minutes of meetings, transcripts of speeches, newspaper stories, and other documents from different offices and files. Two of the best examples of this approach are by Clark (1970, 1972) and Pettigrew (1979, 1983). Anyone who contemplates using archives to study organizational culture should review their work.

I was able to identify the discrepancy between the Community Center's espoused value (programs should benefit clients) and assumption-in-use (programs should be maximally convenient for clients' parents) by examining staff meeting minutes. These minutes provided uncontestable evidence that program policy decisions *always* turned on parental impacts—not clients. I used the same approach to confirm a hunch about State Health assumptions concerning private health care providers. The hunch had been planted during several advisory and policy-formulating meetings. Not one private physician had held a leadership position nor been influential in discussions. This was a very unusual absence of deference accorded doctors in health-related meetings. All I had to do was go back through a few years of records to verify that no health care provider had chaired similar groups at State Health. With only minimal additional work, the inductive step from facts to basic assumption was easy and fairly safe to take.

Whereas organizational archives are fruitful sources of accurate information about organizational culture, investigators need to be cautious about official organizational publications such as brochures, annual reports, and press releases. These types of documents typically reflect only what a team of executives and public relations people want to convey publicly. However, just as with physical settings, official publications can provide information often by what they don't say—by what is omitted.

Books, newspaper stories, and business magazine articles are not organizational archives or artifacts, but they are related sources of valuable information about an organization's culture. Martin and Siehl (1983) note the absence of any published "prodigal son" stories at General Motors. They correlate the absence of such stories with General Motors's strong cultural value on company loyalty.

Organization Charts. Unfortunately, most organization charts are not reliable sources of information about organizational culture. Typically, they depict how someone in authority believes an organization should appear—usually, nothing more. In fact, Meyer (1984); Greenfield (1984); Weick (1976); and others contend that the primary purpose served by organization charts is to convince important constituencies that the organization knows what it is about and is under control.

Organization charts do provide some useful information about organizational culture by their tallness or flatness; clean or scrambled lines of authority; types of position titles (director versus coordinator); the presence or absence of peoples' names in position boxes; product or functional arrangements; and the placement of staff advisory and "figurehead" offices (such as EEO). The Emergency Medical Services Office is almost hidden among several other minor regulatory offices on the State Health organization chart. The chart depicts most of these offices reporting directly to the division director, and there are coordinative or advisory dotted-line relationships with the commissioner's staff. In contrast, the EMS Office reports to the director through an intermediary office and has no dotted-line relationships with any office. The organization chart accurately communicates the EMS Office's lack of standing in the division and in State Health and its absence of coordinate relationships. However, this amount of accurate information is not typical of organization charts.

Summary: Researching Material Artifacts. Information about organizational culture can be collected quickly and relatively inexpensively by looking at material artifacts such as physical settings and archives. Material artifacts often can be accessed without encountering too many barriers. On the other hand, they should only be used as clues or to confirm other findings, because they cannot be trusted to provide accurate information by themselves. The two biggest problems with using artifacts are discriminating between signs and symbols and validly inferring (piecing together) cultural patterns from them.

Listening to the Language

If an organizational investigator is privy to ongoing routine conversations, "just listening" to the language, jargon, humor, and metaphors of an organization is one of the best ways to learn about organizational culture (Boland & Hoffman, 1983; Evered, 1983; Louis, 1981; Pondy, 1978, 1983). Often, questions do not even need to be asked until after considerable information has already been gleaned. One only needs to hear two or three Jones & Jones employees call clients "assholes" before a pattern becomes evident. It only takes sitting in on two or three Scenic Mountain State College staff meetings to realize that academic jargon is not used, the language is "rural down-home," faculty research and publications are not mentioned, and influence is determined by how well people match with the College culture. The executive director of the Community Center cannot talk about his organization or its operations for ten minutes without using phrases such as "within her authority"; "didn't go through the chain of command"; "doesn't understand the principles of management"; and "I only talk with people in other organizations who are at my (organizational) level, and I expect the same from them." Military management jargon is hard to overlook in a human service-delivery agency!

Pondy (1978) has identified two categories of situations when language is not shared. These situations provide unusually valuable opportunities to collect information about organizational culture.

1. *Having different lexicons* is the easiest situation to recognize because "it carries its own signal of mismatch" (p. 93)—for example, when organization members use a phrase totally foreign to the investigator.

2. *Lexicons are identical but the meanings attached to the words differ*. This second category of situations is much more difficult to recognize (Pondy, 1978). During one visit to Scenic Mountain State College, several staff members mentioned the College's increasing numbers of "nontraditional women students." I paid no attention to the phrase the first few times I heard it used, because I have a meaning for it. Unlike the first situation mentioned above, the words themselves did not trigger recognition of a situation where language was not being shared. I erroneously assumed it meant the same thing to them that it does to me. About the fourth time, however, a light went on in my head—the people using the phrase are members of a very conservative, traditional, rural culture. If *nontraditional women students* held the same meaning for them as it does for me, there would be more emotion in their voices. So, I finally asked what it

meant. The answer was: all women students who are not single and/or do not enroll directly from high school. With additional probing, my sources added all unmarried women with children (even those who enroll directly from high school). Their language had been trying to "shout" information to me about the College's culture. I almost missed it because *the lexicons are identical, but the meanings attached to the words differ.*

3. To Pondy's two situations under which language is not shared, I add a third. *The lexicons are identical, and the meanings attached to the words are the same; but the use seems inappropriate.* This is another easy situation for an investigator to recognize. The Community Center executive director's use of military management jargon in a human service-delivery agency and Jones & Jones' "assholes" are clear examples.

These three situations when language is not shared provide excellent opportunities for an investigator to collect important information about organizational culture. Two of the three are easy to recognize; the third, however, requires sensitivity.

Interviewing is an obvious alternative way to learn about an organizational culture through its language. Still, organization members tend to adjust their language when talking with outsiders, especially in individual interviews. Most of us do not use organization jargon at home or at noncompany social gatherings. The same is true when an outsider is interviewing a member. On the other hand, organization language often creeps into group interviews because the interviewees talk with each other as well as with the interviewer.

Other techniques, such as tape recording discussions and content-analyzing meeting notes or internal memoranda, can be useful data collection methods for some purposes. In my experience, they are of questionable value for investigating culture through language. Simply listening and conducting group interviews are more productive approaches.

Myths, Stories, Sagas, and Legends. If a researcher is on-site with regularity, he or she will hear organizational stories and myths almost every time people gather informally—in the lunchroom, during coffee breaks, and always at company parties.[6] The types of more formal gatherings where stories, myths, sagas, and legends are told are very predictable. Virtually every organizational celebration,

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[6]I have had difficulty accessing stories and myths only when they deal with issues such as serious violations of laws or societal moral codes.

recognitional event, new employee orientation session, and (non-technical) in-house training program is a seldom-missed opportunity to tell and retell organizational stories (Martin, 1982b; Martin & Powers, 1983; Wilkins, 1983).

It is quite easy to nudge people into relating organizational stories and myths in individual or group interviews. The only problem—getting people started—usually can be overcome with a lead-in statement followed with an open-ended question such as: "Every organization has faced at least one major crisis in its history. Tell me about the biggest crisis this organization has faced—when its survival or independence was in danger." After the initial responses are received, a short series of follow-up questions usually elicits an important story. For example: "How did people respond to that crisis? How did the organization deal with it?" "Who were the important actors?" Once again, I have found group interviews more productive than individual interviews.

During a group interview at the Community Center, one person alluded to a woman manager who had been forced into resigning. A second giggled and mentioned that sometimes she hadn't dressed appropriately. A third interrupted enthusiastically with, "that means she didn't always wear a bra." Then, the whole story and its moral just flowed out with excitement. Group members kept interrupting each other, almost competing to tell the particularly poignant episodes—as much to each other as to me. From there, related story after story was told, each of which fit together into a saga.

Clark (1970) and Pettigrew (1979, 1983) carried the analysis of stories one step further. They studied archives, identified periods of major organizational crisis, and focused their searches for stories and myths on the crisis periods. They then sought and found commonalities among the individual stories, sometimes in the content of the crises but more frequently in the patterns of responses to them. Clark labeled these patterned stories *sagas*.

Saga analysis is a very potent approach whose value far exceeds descriptions of organizational culture. It surfaces perceptions of how a particular organization survived serious crises; preventitive measures it *should* take to avoid similar crises (such as not borrowing for product development); and how organization members *should* solve future problems (not just crises). In short, an analysis of sagas can identify an organization's basic blueprints for making important decisions. Thus, sagas can be used not only to describe culture, but also *to predict future patterns of organizational behavior*. This ability explains why Clark's work (1970, 1972) is one of the most significant methodological contributions to the organizational culture perspective.

Patterns of Behavior: Level 1B of Organizational Culture

The most useful methods for studying rites and rituals are similar to those for language, stories, and myths (Smircich, 1983, pp. 59–61). Norms also can be studied through observation and interviews (Davis 1984). Therefore, these investigatory approaches are not discussed again here. Instead the analysis of methods for investigating patterns of behavior proceeds directly to the use of questionnaires for studying behavioral norms.

Innumerable pencil and paper instruments, questionnaires, and surveys exist for identifying group norms in organizations. For example, Allen and Kraft (1982) fill four appendices with just some of their own instruments. The "Instrumentation" section in most issues of University Associates' *Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators* contains instruments for identifying organizational group norms and related phenomena. Some of them have the advantage of being normed for different types of organizations.[7]

It is tempting to use questionnaires to identify norms and then hope those norms reflect basic underlying assumptions. Instruments are inexpensive to acquire, administer, and analyze. Because most instrument scores are quantifiable, findings can be compared between organizational units and within units over time. (Besides, questionnaires look like research!) Repeatedly, I have found organization members wanting to believe in questionnaire findings. Even when instrument scores do not match with organizational realities, some people always search for reasons to justify discrepancies in ways that do not invalidate either the findings or the realities.

Instruments also have their problems. First, the norms that can be identified are only those included in the instrument. If a norm is not there waiting to be checked or circled, it will not appear in the results. Second, although many instruments attempt to measure the intensity of norms, few can identify whether norms are pivotal or peripheral in a given organizational culture (Schein, 1980, p. 100). Third, most instruments group items into scales or dimensions for scoring purposes, and the scales never seem to form a coherent whole

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[7] *The Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators* is published annually by University Associates, Inc., La Jolla, California. It is edited by J. William Pfeiffer and John E. Jones, but the sequencing of the two editors alternates each year. Materials in the *Handbook* "may be freely reproduced for educational/training activities. There is no requirement to obtain special permission for such uses. . . . Systematic or large-scale reproduction for distribution—or inclusion of items in publications for sale—may be done only with prior written permission" (1978 *Handbook*, reverse side of front page).

in the organization being studied. It seems as though one always has to either go back to individual items (discard the scales) or reformulate the scales (often with no theoretical justification for doing so) in order to obtain results that have meaning. The fourth problem is so obvious that it should not need to be stated. Relationships between behavioral norms and other levels of organizational culture are at best questionable. When I survey norms, that is all I can claim to be measuring (*unless* organizational culture is defined operationally as norms).

Most questionnaires are quick, easy, and inexpensive to administer and analyze. If they could yield useful information about organizational culture, they would be ideal investigatory tools. Thus, when I was asked to identify the organizational culture at Jones & Jones, CPAs, I was handed a golden opportunity to test the correlation between an organization's culture as identified by a norms questionnaire and through other research methods.

At the start-up meeting with the Jones & Jones staff, copies of Alexander's (1978) *Organizational Norms Opinionnaire* were distributed with self-addressed return envelopes.[8] The returned envelopes remained sealed until I had spent almost three calendar months collecting information about the basic underlying cultural assumptions. I wandered around, looked, listened, and interviewed people alone and in small groups. I also spent four hours meeting with the full staff and eighteen additional hours with individuals and small groups, verifying the accuracy of the basic cultural assumptions I had identified, filling in missing pieces, and reconciling discrepancies. Only then did I open the envelopes and analyze the responses to the questionnaires.

The *Organizational Norms Opinionnaire* may be an excellent instrument for identifying norms, but it was not useful for identifying Jones & Jones's basic cultural assumptions through the company's norms. The score sheet groups the instrument's forty-two items into ten scales (Table 5–1). Only two of the ten scale scores provided accurate clues about Jones & Jones's basic underlying assumptions: Leadership/Supervision and Candor/Openness. Most of the other scale scores were misleading. Colleague/Associate Relations and Customer/Client Relations were the highest and second highest ranked scales (most positive)—neither of which has any touch with the realities of that organization's culture. Remember, Jones & Jones is where *everyone assumes* that clients are easily replaced assholes! The

[8]The instrument and its scoring sheet are in the first appendix to this chapter. See also Alexander (1977) and Footnote 7.

TABLE 5–1 *Organizational Norm Opinionnaire* Scales*
Rank Order of Scale Scores at Jones & Jones†

	Scale	*Rank*
I.	Organizational/Personal Pride	10
II.	Performance/Excellence	5
III.	Teamwork/Communication	6
IV.	Leadership/Supervision	9
V.	Profitability/Cost Effectiveness	4
VI.	Colleague/Associate Relations	1
VII.	Customer/Client Relations	2
VIII.	Innovativeness/Creativity	7
IX.	Training/Development	3
X.	Candor/Openness	8

* From Alexander (1978, pp. 85–87).

† According to Alexander, the scale scores reflect whether or not the norms "support the organization's goals and objectives . . . [or] promote behavior that works against organizational goals" (p. 81). Thus, the #1 ranking for "Colleague/Associate Relations" supposedly reflects very positive norms—norms that promote good working relations. The #10 ranking for "Organizational/Personal Pride" reportedly reflects negative norms—norms that promote behavior that works against pride in self and company.

Please try to ignore the fact that the instrument does not address organizational goals and objectives. Apparently Alexander assumes them.

lowest-ranked scale (most negative), Organizational/Personal Pride, was equally misleading.

Not all of Alexander's scale scores were misleading. The Leadership/Supervision scale's low ranking would have provided a useful clue about Jones & Jones's organizational culture. It correctly reflected basic assumptions about supervision and supervisors. The title *supervisor* is a facade. Supervisors (*seniors* and *managers* in CPA jargon) have no supervisory roles or responsibilities. All supervising is done directly by the elder Mr. Jones—a behavioral manifestation of one of his basic assumptions. Likewise, the Openness/Candor scale ranking would have been a useful direction-pointer; but any slightly astute observer could have identified Jones & Jones's norms in this area quickly and easily without using the instrument.

Alexander's scale scores provided little accurate information about Jones & Jones. (Just enough to be dangerous!) Scores on a few items would have provided helpful pointers. Some of the items appropriately scored low (negatively) include: "look on the supervisor as a source of help and development," "suggest confronting the boss about a mistake or something in the boss's style that is creating problems," "sometimes see the customer or client as a burden or obstruction to getting the job done."

In summary, Alexander's (1978) *Organizational Norms Opinionnaire* was at best minimally useful and at worst misleading for identifying basic underlying cultural assumptions through norms at Jones & Jones. Thus, this particular instrument was not even useful for spotting clues about fruitful areas to investigate. Unfortunately, it was not worth using for this purpose. (Once again, it is important to note that the instrument was designed to identify norms—not cultural assumptions. It may be an excellent instrument for its intended purpose.) I had hoped to find positive correlations between questionnaire findings and the results of other culture identifying activities. Then, the methodological advantages of questionnaires would have warranted its use on similar projects—even if only to obtain directional clues to follow-up with other more time-consuming information collecting approaches.[9]

Level 2 of Organizational Culture: Beliefs and Values

Artifacts and patterned behaviors can be seen, touched, or heard. Norms can be inferred from patterns of behavior. Beliefs, values, and ideologies are a step further removed from observable behaviors (Figure 3–3, p. 62); and relationships between what is observable and what is inside peoples' heads can be obscured by intervening factors. Thus, inferring beliefs and values from observable behavior is a risky endeavor. On the other hand, beliefs, values, and ideologies are conceptually close to basic underlying assumptions (Figure 3–3, page 62). In theory, they should be more informative than norms as proxy indicators of basic underlying assumptions.

Just as organizational norms instruments, innumerable pencil and paper questionnaires and surveys exist for identifying values and beliefs in and out of organizations (Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1972; Superka, Johnson & Ahrens, 1975). And, once again, most issues of the *Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators* contain several instruments for identifying beliefs, values, and ideologies. Can these instruments be used as convenient proxy indicators of basic assumptions?

To answer this question, Roger Harrison's (1975) (unnamed)

[9]This conclusion cannot be generalized to other instruments for identifying norms or to other organizations.

instrument for diagnosing organization ideology was administered at Jones & Jones along with Alexander's *Organization Norms Opinionnaire*. The administration procedures were the same. The specific research question was: Can Jones & Jones's basic underlying cultural assumptions be identified with this questionnaire, which was designed to uncover organization ideologies? The ideology questionnaire and its scoring profiles are in the second appendix of this chapter.

The primary reason for selecting Harrison's instrument was the compatibility of his (1972) theoretical perspective with the concepts of organizational culture used in this study (Figure 3–3, p. 62). Harrison views ideology as the justification for norms and thus for organizational behavior. Ideology "establishes a rationale for these [norms] 'dos' and 'don'ts.' This rationale explains the behavior of an organization's members" (p. 120).[10]

Harrison's instrument is not normed. Its aim is to enable people to identify where their organization stands on some important ideological dimensions, and to help people identify differences between their organization's ideologies and their own (Harrison, 1975, p. 101). Unlike the *Organizational Norms Opinionnaire,* Harrison's is a forced choice questionnaire that requires respondents to choose between four ideological orientations: power, role, task, and self.

Nine Jones & Jones staff people (between one third and one half of the staff) volunteered that completing Harrison's instrument had caused them personal discomfort—not simply because it is a forced choice instrument, but also because answering it had required them to think about things they did not like to think about. The large number of strikeouts and erasures substantiated their comments. Needless to say, I explored further. An amalgamation of paraphrased statements about their discomfort was: "It is bad enough to be reminded of our—my—counterproductive behaviors (by the *Organizational Norms Opinionnaire*), but it is painful to remember *why* we do some of the things we do (while completing the ideology questionnaire)." The ideology instrument required them to consciously admit that their "silly" behaviors were natural consequences of universally held systems of beliefs in the firm. Many of the Jones & Jones assumptions had been forgotten or suppressed. Some of them are not

[10]Handy (1978) acknowledges Harrison as the source of his idea to use Greek gods to symbolize organizational culture (Acknowledgments, p. i). Handy slightly modified this instrument, named it *Questionnaire on the Cultures of Organisations,* and wrote Chapter 3 around it.

very noble. Yet these people continue to live in the culture, transmitting it to newcomers. Moreover, whereas behaviors can be modified, ideologies have an aura of permanence—just as any other accepted truths.

Scores on Harrison's (1975) four orientations were somewhat revealing; but the instrument's scales were not its real value. Many individual item scores were accurate clues about organizational culture. More important, however, completing the questionnaire opened peoples' eyes to basic cultural assumptions. This made my other data collection activities much more productive.

Nevertheless, this greatest value of the instrument poses a serious methodological problem. Administration of the instrument may have influenced (biased) all subsequent data collection activities. If so, the sequence in which people completed the two instruments may account for some of the confusing-to-misleading scale scores and rankings on the *Organizational Norms Opinionnaire.* More important, the Jones & Jones people mentioned instrument items to me repeatedly in interviews and discussions. So, in addition to affecting scores on the norms instrument, the ideology questionnaire probably affected findings from all of my other data collection activities—and these findings were used to gauge the accuracy of the two instruments.

The instrument's second problem is simply a limitation: it only taps four ideologies.

Harrison's instrument for diagnosing organization ideology provided some accurate information about a few basic assumptions at Jones & Jones, apparently even some forgotten assumptions. By stirring up suppressed thoughts and emotions, it also made subsequent verbal and observational data collection activities more fruitful. On the other hand, it probably altered the results I would have otherwise obtained through these other activities, thereby raising serious doubts about the independence of findings.[11]

Should Harrison's instrument be used as a proxy indicator or to get directional clues about organizational culture? In a study conducted for purely academic inquiry purposes, no, I do not believe so. Its effect on data collected through other methods seems to have been great. On the other hand, in a study initiated by an organization's request for help, I would not hesitate to use it again. The advantages far outweigh the potential problems of interaction contamination.

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[11] Including the findings used to assess the accuracy of the scores on the two instruments.

Level 3 of Organizational Culture: Basic Underlying Assumptions

How does one identify an organization's basic underlying assumptions? Because this is the newest conception of organizational culture, few organization theorists have adopted it, and fewer yet have attempted to identify it. The methodological problems are formidable. For example, although Siehl & Martin (1984) have acknowledged and accepted Schein's (1984) conceptualization of organizational culture as basic underlying assumptions, their research design did not attempt to tap basic assumptions. Instead, they used knowledge of the contents of organizational stories as a proxy measure for knowledge of organizational culture. Their methodological choice was made for practical reasons—the problems of identifying basic assumptions are imposing. Likewise, in testing two instruments to see whether basic assumptions at Jones & Jones could be identified by proxy, my first effort (norms) failed. The second (ideology) was helpful but incomplete. Although the subject needs considerably more study, my first attempt here indicates that easily administered, single-method, diagnostic tools have only limited utility. At best they can only be small parts of a more comprehensive culture-deciphering strategy.

Clearly, deciphering an organization's Level 3 basic underlying assumptions richly, thoroughly, and accurately is a substantial undertaking. Currently, such deciphering efforts require a lengthy involvement with the organization; the presence of an outside perspective; almost unrestricted access to people and records; and the use of multiple data-collection strategies (only a few of which have been described in this chapter). Three combinations of researcher roles and methodological strategies can satisfy these four requirements:

1. Participant-observation, with the identity of the researcher concealed, using ethnographic research strategies (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Goffman, 1961).
2. Participant-observation and iterative interviewing, conducted jointly by an outsider who has a clinical perspective (not an ethnographic perspective) and key insider(s) (Schein, 1984; 1985).
3. Participant-observation, with the identity of the researcher revealed, using quasi-ethnographic research strategies (Kaufman, 1960; Van Maanen, 1982b).

The first role/strategy combination can be dismissed rather quickly. There are not many people who are willing to follow Erving Goffman's (1961) example and work as a custodian in a mental asylum for a year under a concealed identity.[12] How many persons would or could remain in an organization that long, pretending to be someone else, without losing their outside perspective? How many positions in an organization would give a concealed identity researcher access to the organizational culture, not just a subculture? How could one determine whether she or he was encountering the organizational culture or a subculture without "blowing cover"? Concealed identity enthography is not a feasible role/strategy, except perhaps in a few very unusual situations.

Joint Iterative Interviewing by an Outsider with a Clinical Perspective and Key Insider(s). Schein (1984, 1985) argues persuasively for the second role/strategy as *the only way* to decipher organizational culture accurately. Unless organization members have a "particular stake in the intellectual issues that may have motivated the study" (p. 21), they have no true motivation to expend the emotion, energy, or time required to dig, find, and explore forgotten basic assumptions—particularly if the assumptions are discomforting or not particularly noble, as at Jones & Jones. On the other hand, when an organization asks for help, the psychological contract between the investigator (who then fills a clinician role) and the client is entirely different. Organizations ask for assistance when they perceive they are or will be experiencing problems they cannot cope with by themselves. To withhold data, effort, or time from the clinician would be akin to a sick patient withholding information from the doctor. It happens—but not frequently nor for very long.

Even the most skilled outsider-clinician has difficulty learning the intricacies of an organization's culture. For a while, the clinician will only be exposed to its surface layers. A clinician working alone can never be sure of the accuracy of his or her interpretations of findings. A collaborating insider(s) is needed, someone who will question, challenge, and otherwise respond to the clinician's hunches and observations about cultural clues, patterns, gaps, and incongruities (Schein, 1985, p. 113).

An inside collaborator cannot do the job alone either. Just as a fish cannot describe water, an insider cannot tell an outsider "what the basic assumptions are and how they are patterned"

[12]Only the superintendent of the asylum knew Goffman's true identity and reasons for being there. He maintained the secret.

(Schein 1985, p. 113). A clinician-outsider *and* perceptive insiders are needed to decipher basic cultural assumptions.

It takes time and involvement to learn the right questions to ask in a given organization. The first sets of interview questions are never adequate. Moreover, even in a clinician role, few outsiders can gain the full confidence of organization members in one or two encounters. Thus, Schein (1985) proposes a ten-step iterative interviewing process to decipher organizational culture[13]:

1. Entry and focus on surprises.
2. Systematic observation and checking for patterns.
3. Locating a motivated insider.
4. Revealing the clinician's surprises, puzzlements, and hunches to the motivated insider.
5. Joint exploration to find explanations for the meaning of surprises.
6. Formalizing hypotheses and identifying data needed to test hypothesized assumptions.
7. Systematic checking, consolidating, and testing hypotheses (using questionnaires, artifacts, structured and unstructured interviews, etc.).
8. Pushing to the level of assumptions.
9. Perpetual recalibration of the cultural model.
10. Formal written description—articulating and disseminating the paradigm to help prepare the organization to use the information (pp. 114–119).

Schein's ten-step model incorporates research approaches from virtually all current organizational research perspectives. The first four steps are in the inductive, *grounded theory*-generating tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The sixth and seventh steps encourage the use of designs from the *logical-positivist quasi-experimental* paradigm. The ninth step should cause any good *systems and contingency* school member to smile. Joint diagnostic roles for outsiders and insiders, and the iterative "find, piece together, clarify, verify, go find again" process are standard *organization development (O.D.)* intervention strategies (French & Bell, 1984, p. 109; French, Bell, & Zawacki, 1983, pt. 3). Schein's expansive use of *interview* to mean multiple, inductive, proximate efforts to describe organizational culture through its ordinary behaviors should at least partially

[13] Schein (p. 114) uses the term *interviewing* broadly to include other qualitative data-collection techniques, such as observing.

organizational functions, the clinical model probably is advantageous. If the goal is purely to describe basic cultural assumptions, one of the diagnostic ethnographic styles probably is adequate.

6. Any organizational culture research methodologies not from the logical-positivist paradigm will be challenged or impugned by logical-positivists.
7. Any organizational culture research methodologies from the logical-positivist paradigm will be challenged or impugned by qualitative methodologists.

Chapter Appendix 1

MARK ALEXANDER'S *ORGANIZATIONAL NORMS OPINIONNAIRE* WITH SCORING SHEETS AND SCORING PROFILES

Instructions: This opinionnaire is designed to help you determine the norms that are operating in your organization. The opinionnaire asks you to assess what the reaction of most persons in your organization *would be* if another person said a particular thing or behaved in a particular manner. For example, the first item reads:

> "If an employee in your organization were to criticize the organization and the people in it . . . most other employees would . . ."

To complete this statement, choose one of the following five alternatives:

A. Strongly agree with or encourage it
B. Agree with or encourage it
C. Consider it not important
D. Disagree with or discourage it
E. Strongly disagree with or discourage it

Choose the alternative that you think would be the most common response to the action or behavior stated and place the letter corresponding to that alternative in the blank space following each item. Complete all forty-two statements in the same manner, being as honest as possible.

If an employee in your organization were to . . .	Most Other Employees Would:
1. criticize the organization and the people in it . . .	______
2. try to improve things even though the operation is running smoothly . . .	______

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