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Friendship Patterns and Culture: The Control of Organizational Diversity

Organizational culture is often described as a management control device, but this view obscures the importance of informal social interactions for the emergence and modification of culture. We elicited seven cultural dimensions used by employees to predict and make sense of the behavior patterns of others in an entrepreneurial firm. Forty-seven key employees rated each other on these dimensions. Consistent with predictions, friends, relative to nonfriends, made similar attributions about fellow employees across the seven dimensions. The pattern of results remained significant even controlling for demographic and positional similarities. Further, the more people disagreed with their friends, the more they tended to be dissatisfied with their jobs. The control of organizational diversity may be as much an interpersonal initiative as it is a prerogative of management manipulation.

HOW DO PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS, GOALS, AND VALUES successfully coordinate their activities in organizations? What enables people in organizations to plan their own productive efforts in concert with their fellow workers? The usual answer to this question in the organizational-culture literature is that cooperative behavior is elicited through the rigorous socialization of new members to a set of managerially determined social norms. This managerial view treats the culture of an organization as an independent variable that can be manipulated to control deviant behavior (e.g., Ouchi 1980; for a critique see Barley, Meyer, and Gash 1988). From this culture-as-a-managerial-tool perspective, an effective organization is like a clan, in that it relies on mechanical solidarity—a religious adherence to common beliefs and practices—to ensure cooperation (Durkheim 1933:175–178). The clan cannot tolerate any divergence from the "totality of belief and sentiments common to all members of the group" (Durkheim 1933:129).

The tradition of industrial anthropology offers a quite different answer to the question of the control of diversity. Starting with the Hawthorne Studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939) and continuing through the applied anthropology movement in organizational behavior, the emphasis is on the importance of informal relations between coworkers (see Baba 1986; Holzberg and Giovannini 1981; and Trice 1985, for reviews). From this perspective, organizational culture is not a cohesive, organization-wide control system implemented by top management, but an emergent property of informal relationships within work groups. Researchers within this tradition have investigated how norms, beliefs, attributions, behaviors, and other aspects of organizational culture are controlled through the informal networks of coworkers. One implication of this literature has been that ignoring cultural variety in the workplace can lead to unanticipated organizational conflict (cf. Stoffle 1975; Whyte 1951).

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Thus we see two different views on organizational culture in the literature. From the culture-as-a-managerial-tool perspective, culture is a unifying force, a normative glue that binds people together (Siehl 1985). Culture as an emergent property of personal relationships suggests a much more fragmented view of culture, with the possibility of competing subcultures existing within the same organization (cf. Gregory 1983). This article builds on both of these perspectives to suggest that institutionalized traditions, set in place by the organization's founders, shape and are shaped by emergent beliefs and actions. Organizational culture, at any point in time, can be expressed as a set of social constructs negotiated between organizational members to anticipate and control the motivational and cognitive diversity in the organization (cf. Wallace 1970:36). These shared constructs allow organizational members to make sense of ongoing organizational activities.

In this article, we treat culture as a cognitive system (as defined by Keesing 1974) that is negotiated between interacting individuals who create what Geertz (1973) has referred to as locally shared systems of meaning. We first describe a method for eliciting the overarching cultural constructs utilized by people in organizations. Second, we look at how the network of informal relationships in the organization patterns the way people use culturally defined constructs. Third, we investigate whether the social network operates to control cognitive diversity in the organization.

The Site

The organization selected as the research site was a small regional distributor called Pacific Distributors Incorporated (PacDis)[1] that employed a total of 162 people at its headquarters and four branch offices. The company had been founded by its current president, John Briggs, but was run on a day-to-day basis by Bob Jamison, who had been with the firm since its inception. Jamison had worked his way up from salesman to chief operating officer.

Both Briggs and Jamison were strong advocates of the importance of good employee relations. Over the past few years, as the organization's success had led to rapid expansion of employees and facilities, Briggs and Jamison had routinely scheduled organizational development interventions designed to improve communications between the different factions in the company. According to the consultants' reports, there was an ongoing ideological struggle between two main groups in the organization. On the one hand, there were those like Bob Jamison, who believed in the primary importance of maintaining good social relations within the organization. On the other hand, there were those like Ralph Gibson, the chief financial officer, who believed that financial control and the bottom line were of paramount importance.

According to the consultants, Jamison spent most of his time dealing with day-to-day coordination problems and had no time to plan long-term strategy. During our talks with Jamison, he referred to the chief financial officer, Gibson, as a "bean counter" and described the consultants' intervention efforts as attempts to persuade people like Gibson to be less rigid and demanding in their treatment of others. Gibson, on the other hand, was concerned with how much the consultants were costing the company. He believed that, since his entry into the organization from a Big Eight accounting firm, much needed attention had been given to financial controls and accountability. According to Gibson, the organization under Jamison's control was in danger of being run too loosely.

Compared to Jamison and Gibson, president Briggs was removed from the everyday running of the organization, but as the founder of PacDis he had been instrumental in establishing the cultural and expressive components of the company (cf. Pettigrew 1979:574). He was a strong believer in the importance of a friendly, open style of management that placed a great deal of trust in each employee. As a result of his guiding influence, the atmosphere at PacDis was noticeably informal. Executives worked with their doors open and jackets off, subordinates were on a first-name basis with executives and engaged in mutual joking and kidding rituals. Standards of dress varied widely from the casually rumpled to the professionally businesslike.

We conducted a series of structured interviews with a sample of PacDis employees to uncover the emic cultural dimensions that characterize the workplace. This phase was essentially exploratory, designed to elicit a set of constructs used by these employees to organize the diversity of styles and approaches we had observed and to anticipate each other's behavior. Based on the results of this first phase, we developed a questionnaire to examine how the network of relationships influenced the applications and interpretations of these emic cultural constructs.

Phase 1: Eliciting the Cultural Constructs

Method

Subjects. We interviewed six men and four women, chosen from the full sample of key management and operational personnel we planned to include in the second phase (see Phase 2 method section, below). Previous research has indicated that the majority of all constructs can be generated by a relatively small sample within a population (Dunn et al. 1986:372). We wanted to capture the diversity of perspectives that existed in the organization. To this end, we interviewed the three top executives who epitomized the cultural tensions in the firm (the owner, the chief operating officer, and the chief financial officer) and seven other employees selected to represent four diverse functional areas and various levels in the firm (two department heads, three supervisors, and two nonsupervisory employees). Each individual in the sample was promised and provided with personalized feedback concerning the constructs elicited in the interviews.

Procedure. In order to operationalize our view of organizational culture, we turned to personal construct theory (Kelly 1955) for a technique designed specifically to elicit the constructs that individuals use to anticipate the behavior of others. Kelly's repertory grid technique has been used in a wide variety of settings to enable individuals to verbalize the cognitive constructs they use to organize and anticipate events (e.g., Romney and D'Andrade 1964; Wexler and Romney 1972). Only a brief discussion of this technique is possible here, but the definitive review of the psychometric properties of this method is provided by Bannister and Mair (1968), and a major review of personal construct research is contained in a book by Adams-Webber (1979). The important point to make is that the repertory grid technique was developed to measure exactly the kind of personal constructs that, according to many cognitive anthropologists (e.g., Wallace 1970), constitute the ideational dimensions of culture.

Each of the ten employees was interviewed at the work site by a researcher for up to 90 minutes using the structured but informal grid technique outlined recently by Eden, Jones, and Sims (1983). The interviewers presented the participants with three names at a time, asking: "In what important way are two of these people alike but different from the third?" and "How is this person different?" Nine names of PacDis employees were utilized, and 24 triads were presented to each participant so that each pair of names occurred twice (Burton and Nerlove 1976). Research has shown that each individual has only a limited number of constructs relevant to any particular domain, and that few new constructs are elicited after twenty or so triads have been presented (Hunt 1951).

For each triad a similarity and a difference were elicited to form the verbal labels of two poles of a bipolar construct. The interviewers followed Kelly's method of encouraging participants to articulate the distinctions and similarities suggested by the triads, to spontaneously elaborate on the bases for their discriminations. Facile similarities such as "They're both in marketing" were not ignored, but following Kelly (1955:222), participants were encouraged to keep talking so that important psychological similarities and differences would emerge. As verbal labels for construct poles were elicited, they were written down by the researchers and confirmed by the participants. The informality of