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Organizational Climate

Definition

Although there is continuing controversy surrounding definitions of organizational climate, and especially its differentiation from organizational culture, the most widely adopted definition is that of Benjamin Schneider (1975), who defined organizational climate as a mutually agreed internal (or molar) environmental description of an organization's practices and procedures. Within this definition, it should be noted that the focus is on organizational members' agreed perceptions of their organizational environment. This is what distinguishes climate from culture, where the focus is on judgments and values, rather than perceived practices and procedures.

Conceptual Overview

The term "organizational climate" was coined in 1939 following a study of children's school clubs by Kurt Lewin and his colleagues. Lewin and his associates characterized leadership within the clubs as corresponding to one of three styles (autocratic, democratic, or laissez faire). These styles determined the "social climate" within the clubs, which led in turn to particular behavior repertoires displayed by the boys.

Kurt Lewin subsequently developed his well known *field theory* of behavior, which he linked to the Gestalt psychology of holistic perception, and expanded to encompass whole organizations. The basic tenet of field theory is that social processes are determined by an interaction of the

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personal characteristics of individuals and elements of the environment. The theory is summed up in the formula, $B = f(P, E)$, where B = behavior, P = person, and E = environment. Lewin and his colleagues were especially interested in the impact of field theory in shaping organizational roles and social processes. In this respect, field theory was invaluable in helping to understand individual and group phenomena within organizational settings.

Social climate as a distinctly organizational concept can be attributed to Rensis Likert, whose work expanded Lewin's ideas, and still actively influence the ways scholars and practitioners approach organizational climate. While Likert's name is usually associated with the 5-point scales he invented to measure employee attitudes, his greatest contribution lay in his invention of the *System 4* model of effective management, or participative management. Building on Lewin's models, Likert contrasted the System 4 management style with System 1 (exploitative authoritative), System 2 (benevolent authoritative), and System 3 (consultative). And, as in the Lewin model, each management style was associated with a corresponding organizational climate. Likert's use of surveys to measure climate – still the dominant approach today – was intended to measure an organizational climate that he considered could not be explicitly known to the organizations' members nor was it something that could be created artificially. In this respect, culture questionnaire measures include multiple items that tap into a range of organizational members' perceptions of their working environment that, together, constitute the member's perceptions of organizational climate.

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Although Likert and many scholars regard organizational climate as a generalized construct, there is also great interest in *particular* climate foci, most usually relating to social or employee wellbeing. While some may see this as a limitation of the construct, advocates of particular climates (often framed as “*X climate*,” “*climate for X*” or “*climate of X*”) claim that this is one of the major advantages of the construct. Examples include climate for service, climate for safety, ethical climate, innovation climate, climate of silence, and climate of fear.

Service Climate. Advocated strongly by Benjamin Schneider, this is perhaps the most well known of the particular climates, operationalized in the popular *SERVQUAL* measure developed by Valarie Zeithaml and her colleagues. *SERVQUAL*, which is usually administered to retail sales customers, measures five dimensions: (1) Tangibles, (2) reliability, (3) responsiveness, (4) assurance, and (5) empathy. Service climate is often cited as the archetypal example of climate insofar as it is a representation of the shared subjective experiences of organizational stakeholders that have direct effects on organizational functioning and effectiveness.

Safety Climate. Coined in 1980 by Israeli psychologist Dov Zohar, safety climate is defined as a special kind of climate, where organizational members share agreed perceptions of employee personal safety and wellbeing within the organization’s environment.

Ethical Climate. Bart Victor and John Cullen were the originators of the idea of ethical climate, and their measure (the Ethical Climate Questionnaire or ECQ) continues today to be the standard

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for measurement. Although closely related to the general culture concept, ethical culture includes elements of Lawrence Kohlberg's concepts of moral reason development and Julian Rotter's idea of internal-external locus of control.

Innovation Climate. This concept was introduced by Neil Anderson and Michael West specifically in relation to assessment of climate in work teams, and is operationalized in the Team Climate Inventory (TCI). Innovation climate refers to a "proximal climate" that develops as a result of close personal relationships and commitments in work teams.

Climate of Silence. Elizabeth Wolf Morrison and Francis Milliken introduced this climate, where employees withhold information about problems in the organization. This behavior is seen to be a result of "powerful forces," that prevent employees from speaking out.

Climate of fear. Based on Joseph de Rivera's notion of emotional climate as a phenomenon that can be "palpably sensed," climate of fear has been operationalized by Gavin Nicholson and Neal Ashkanasy in a 13-item scale that includes items such as, "I feel fearful or anxious when I am at work."

Critical Commentary & Future Directions

One of the critical issues in organizational climate is its differentiation from *organizational culture*. Indeed, the terms "culture" and "climate" are frequently and erroneously

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used interchangeably in the organizational literature. These concepts are, however, clearly differentiated ontological perspectives. Daniel Denison, for example, has pointed out that culture refers to deeply embedded values and assumptions. Climate, on the other hand refers to environmental factors that are consciously perceived and, importantly are subject to organizational control. In this case, as Denison notes, climate is something that can be directly influenced by management policies and leadership, while culture is much more difficult to change and control. Aaro Virtanen, writing in the *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*, brings the differentiation into focus when he observes that organizational commitments are the *constituents* of culture but the *instruments* of climate. Thus, culture is associated with deeply driven desires, while climate is associated with utilitarian strategies that can change as the environment changes.

A further issue that arises from this is whether questionnaires that are often used to measure organizational climate actually constitute measures of climate, even when the questionnaires are ostensibly designed to tap organizational member's values and beliefs, rather than their perceptions of practices and procedures. Writers who have addressed this issue include Geert Hofstede and many of the chapter authors in the *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*. One of these authors, Roy Payne, asks, "How close can they get?" Indeed, leading organizational culture scholars such as Joanne Martin are openly skeptical of the efficacy of any attempts to measure organizational culture using survey questionnaires. This debate,

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however, sits within the domain of culture, rather than climate. Suffice to say that scholars of organizational climate are on safer ground than culture scholars in their use of survey measures.

A further issue, initially raised by Anderson and West with particular reference to Innovation Climate, is the question of climate as an individual versus a shared perception. Climate as an individual perception represents a personal cognitive map of the work environment. Climate as a shared perception, on the other hand, is a group-level phenomenon, and cannot be easily assessed via an aggregation of individual perceptions. Denise Rousseau refers to this as the “aggregation fallacy.” In fact, if the shared perception idea is adopted, then it calls into question the traditional approach to climate measurement based on responses to individually-administered survey instruments.

In terms of international dimensions, most of the leading scholars in the field, including Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, and Harry Triandis, have studied culture, rather than climate. An exception is the recent GLOBE study conducted by Robert House and his colleagues. While the GLOBE project was also intended to address organizational climate, respondents were asked to indicate their attitudes to culture dimensions as practices in the organization (“As is”) versus values (“Should be”). Results for the two measures revealed widely divergent patterns of responses. In this case, it could be argued that the practice measures in this study were in fact measures of climate, despite sharing nomenclature with the culture dimensions. Clearly, there is scope for further research to try to disentangle the culture-climate connection.

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Finally, it is clear that there is still scope to investigate further the idea of emotional climate.

While climate of fear is an obvious candidate, there is no reason an organization should not be characterized by climates corresponding to other dimensions of emotions, for example a “climate of joy” or a “climate of grief”. Joseph de Rivera argued for emotional climate (or “atmosphere”) in general terms, but to date means to measure and observe such states in organizations are yet to be developed.

See also

Business Ethics

Collective Social Phenomena

Community & Organizations

Corporate Culture

Organizational Culture

Trust

Additional reading

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