

Unspoken Factors within Organizational Decision-Making: A Case Study

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Introduction

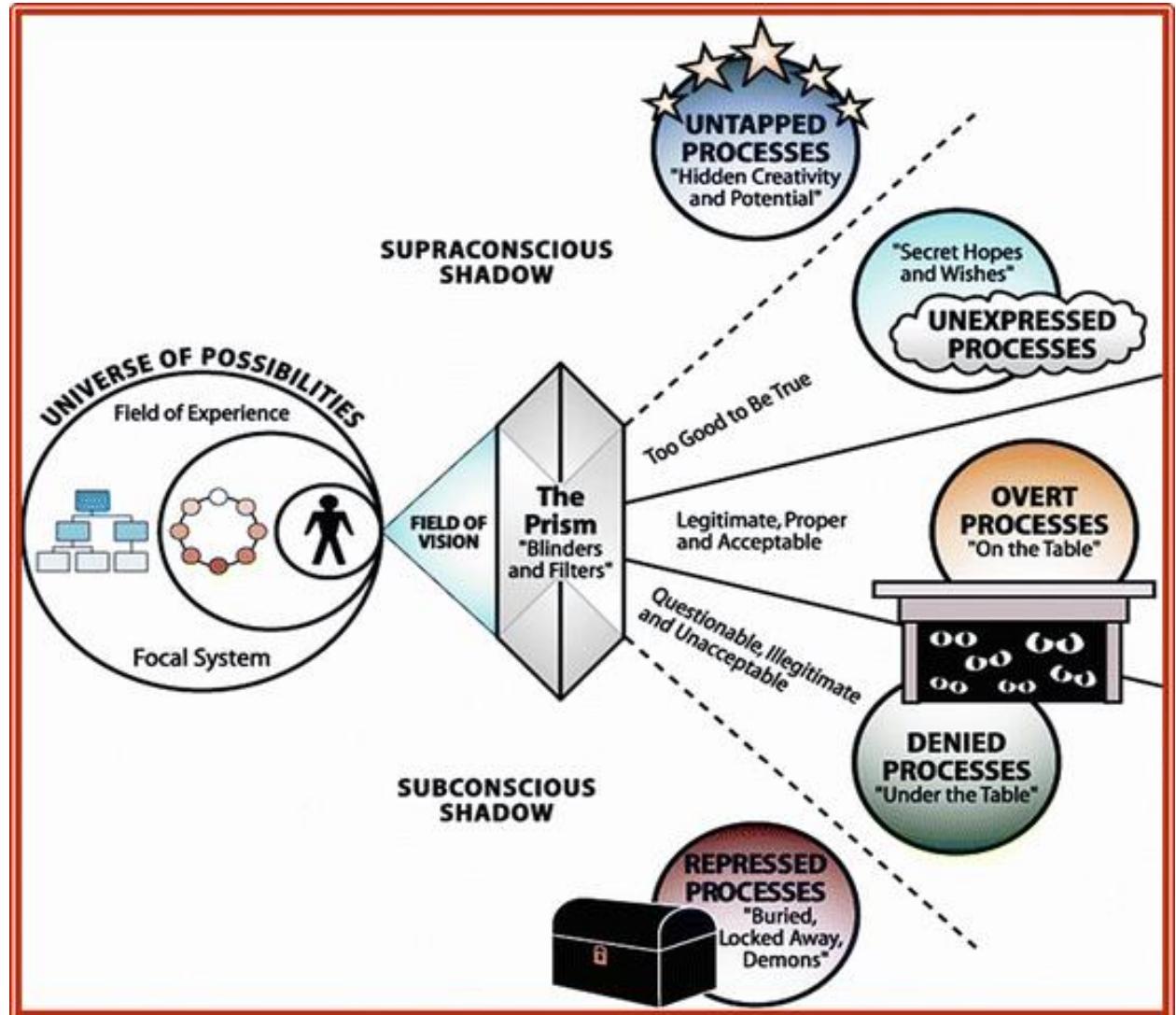
The present study:

- ...is a first attempt to operationalize and study the hidden dimensions proposed by the covert process model (Marshak & Katz, 2001).
- ...operationalizes unspoken factors using terminology such as *elephant in the room*, *Abilene paradox*, *sacred cows*, *hidden alliances*, and *group think* (Harvey, 1974; Janis, 1982).



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Covert Process Model

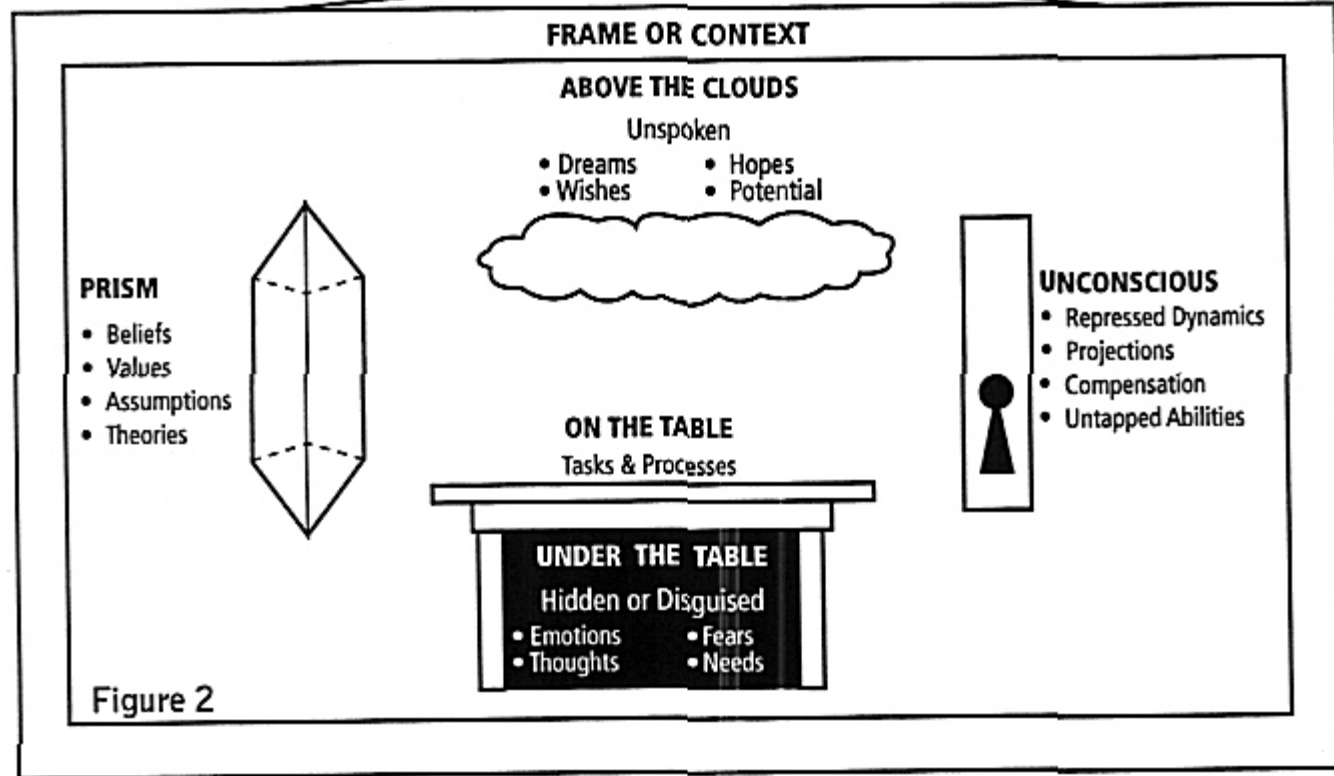




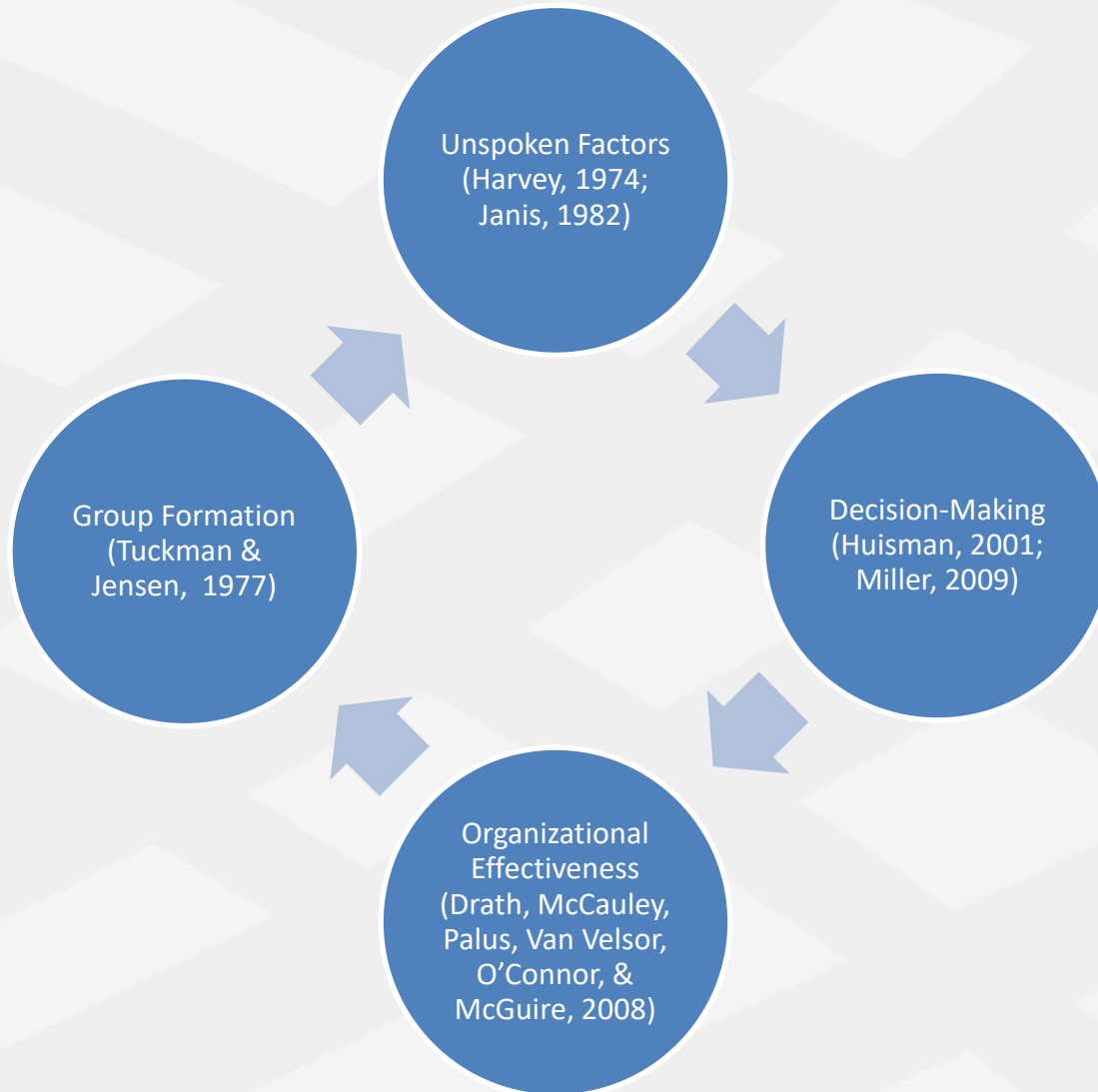
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Covert Processes in Groups



Conceptual Framework



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Method: Qualitative Case Study

- Inductive Approach
- Observation of 2 senior level meetings
- Field Notes
- Semi-structured interviews
- Storytelling
- Power Sensitive Conversations
- Analysis of Artifacts
- Member Checking

Site Overview

- Sample consisted of 12 out of 22 Top Management Team Employees:
 - 4 C-level
 - 2 VP
 - 3 Directors
 - 3 Executives
- 3 Vignettes are highlighted from various viewpoints:
 - 1 C-Level
 - 1 VP
 - 1 Executive
- Large nonprofit in the Southeastern US
- \$27 million operating budget
- 145 full-time staff members
- 1,400 part-time staff members



Interview Guide

- Background Information (2)
- Warm up Questions (1)
- Unspoken Factors that Effect Decision-Making (2)
- General Questions (2)
- Meeting Questions (2)

Interview Guide

Background Information:

1. How many years have you worked with the organization?
2. How many years have you been in your current position?

Warm-up Question:

3. Are you familiar or have you heard of the following terms (also known as unspoken factors)?
 - a. The elephant in the room?
 - b. The trip to Abilene or the Abilene Paradox?
 - c. Sacred cows?
 - d. Hidden alliances?
 - e. Group think?

Unspoken factors that effect decision-making:

4. Explain a time when one of the above unspoken factors was present in the decision-making process?
5. Tell me about at time when they came into play during the decision-making process?
 - a. Tell me about a time when something good happened due to one of these factors? What did the leader do?
 - b. Tell me about a time when one of these factors de-railed or negatively impacted the decision-making process? What did the leader do?
 - c. In either case did it appear to you the leader understood what was going on? Why or why not?

General Questions:

6. What advice do you have for leaders dealing with and/or bringing unspoken factors to the surface?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?

Meeting Questions:

8. In general, how would you evaluate the team's decision-making process?
9. Additional open-ended questions may come up from observing the executive team meetings and/or through the stories shared.

Transcription

- Verbatim Transcript
- Reviewed Responses per Question
- Manually Coded

Meeting Observations

Observation	Interpretation
<p>8:30 a.m. (July)</p> <p>The COO opened the meeting and welcomed the group. He individually welcomed me and asked me to provide an overview of the purpose for me being at the meeting. I noticed that the meeting started with a lot of humor.</p>	<p>The group seems to be collegial and familiar with each other. Many of the group members teased each other prior to and at the opening of the meeting.</p>
<p>8:25 a.m. (August)</p> <p>The HR director sat down at the same table I had put my stuff and stated, “oh you’re back to study us some more, and do you have any recommendations yet?”</p>	<p>My interpretation is the group is aware they are being watched and like to bring it up.</p>

Results, Themes, & Vignettes

Themes:

- Lack of trust stifles communication
- Changing organizational culture
- Previous leadership had an *in-group*

Theme 1: Lack of Trust Stifles Communication

- C-level: “Consensus is sometimes reached due to reticence of staff versus engagement... reticence occurs [because] staff fear repercussion/job [loss] under the guise of change. We are working on trust in the new environment.”

Theme 2: Changing Organizational Culture

- Executive: “I was told that I couldn’t get rid of the staff person because they had been here for a long time. When I brought it up, I was told ‘you can’t touch him’ by my supervisor, his supervisor, and other staff.”

Theme 3: Previous Leadership had an in-group

- VP: “There was a perceived in-group under [previous CEO]. There were times when people were afraid to speak up. If you did speak-up, you were looked down upon and called out negatively. This really limited the discussions”.

Surfacing Unspoken Factors

- C-level: “Build a level of trust with participants in the room.”
- Executive: “Before you pose a question make sure you tell people you want their opinion.”

Conclusions & Future Research

Conclusions:

- Unspoken factors are difficult to surface
- Appears to influence the amount of information that is shared in the decision-making process

Future Research:

- What interventions are needed to surface hidden processes to ensure organization and leader effectiveness?

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