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Organizations as Culture-Bearing Milieux

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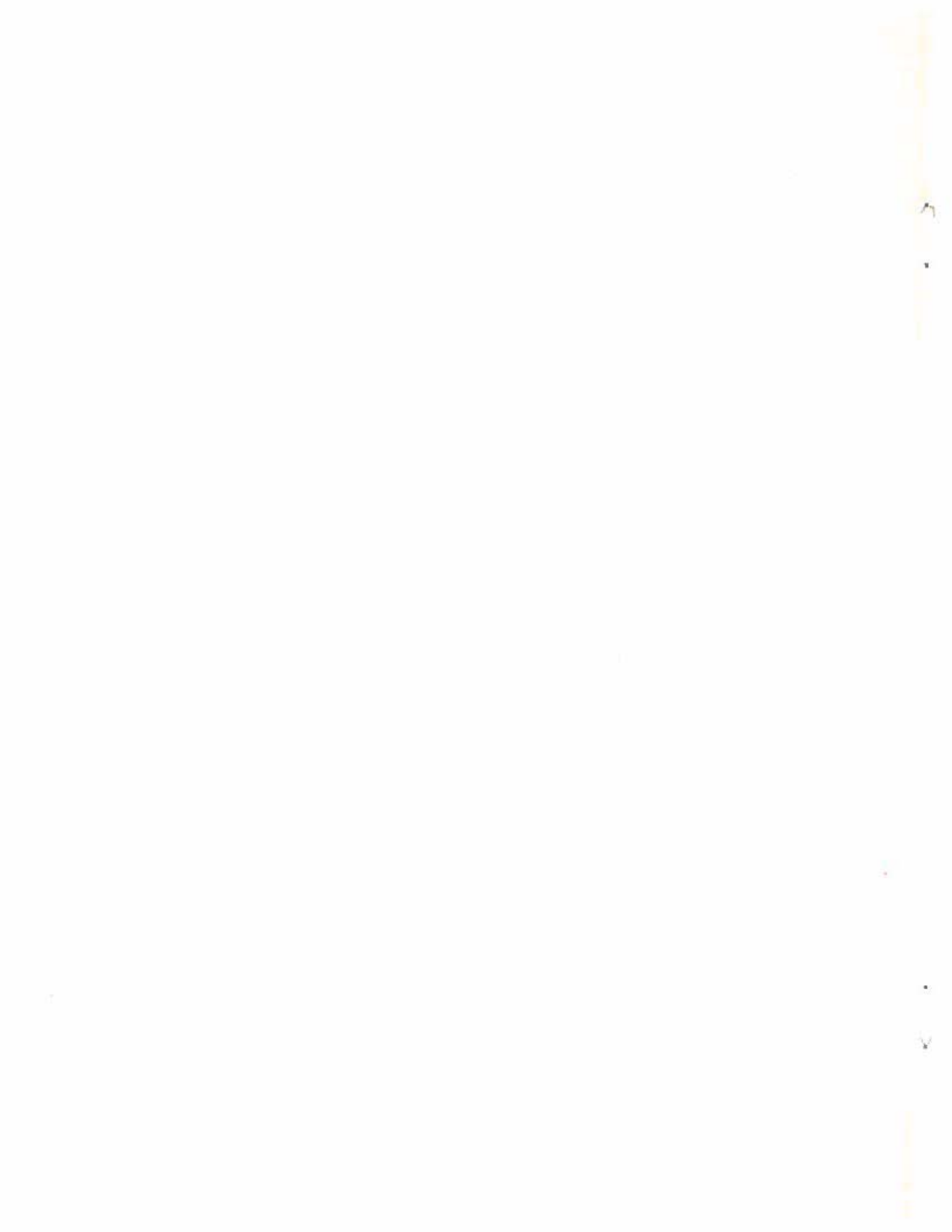Monterey, California 93940
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ORGANIZATIONS AS CULTURE-BEARING MILIEUX

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ORGANIZATIONS AS CULTURE-BEARING MILIEUX

> Any social group, to the extent that it is a distinctive unit, will
> have to some degree a culture differing from that of other groups, a some-
> what different set of common understandings around which action is organized,
> and these differences will find expression in a language whose nuances are
> peculiar to that group...Members of churches speak differently from mem-
> bers of tavern groups; more importantly, members of any particular church or
> tavern group have cultures, and languages in which they are expressed, which
> differ somewhat from those of other groups of the same general type.
> (Becker and Geer, 1970: 134)

My aim in this paper is to present a view of organizations as culture-

bearing milieux, that is, as distinctive social units possessed of a set of

common understandings for organizing action and languages and other symbolic

vehicles for expressing common understandings. The need for such a view is

indicated in several trends in the organizational sciences. First, there has

been a growing dissatisfaction with traditional research efforts, especially

those grounded in essentially positivistic views of organizations. Many have

become disillusioned with fundamental inadequacies in traditional methods and

the meager grasp and leverage on organizational phenomena they have provided

(Silverman, 1970; Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Pondy and Mitroff, 1979; Van Maanen,

1979b; Evered and Louis, 1980).

Simultaneously, there has been a groundswell of interest in things cul-

tural in organizations. Organizational researchers have undertaken studies

of symbols, myths, legends and metaphors, of language systems and other arti-

facts of organizational cultures (Clarke, 1970; Mitroff and Kilmann, 1976;

Wilkins and Martin, 1979; Dandridge, Mitroff and Joyce, 1980; Evered, 1980).

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Additionally, there has been an increasing concern with cognitive processes of individuals in organizations, with issues of how individuals make meaningful their interactions and encounters in daily organization life (Van Maanen, 1979a; Weick, 1979; Louis, 1980a).

A final impetus for developing a cultural view of organizations stems from a practical problem faced by increasing numbers of organizational participants. With the rising rate of voluntary turnover at all organizational levels has come a greater appreciation for cultural aspects of organizations by participants. Specifically, recognition of the need to become acculturated, to "learn the ropes," when entering an unfamiliar organizational setting suggests that some cultural stratum is present in any organization, and that its mastery is critical for the well-functioning of new organizational members (Schutz, 1964; Van Maanen, 1977; Louis, 1980a, 1980b).

My particular interest here is in exploring dimensions of culture relevant to organizational participants and researchers. The discussion will focus on such questions as: What constitutes a cultural perspective? What are psychological and sociological processes and contexts of cultural phenomena? In what ways are organizations culture-bearing milieux? While this effort is necessarily exploratory (we are just beginning to map the territory and this is to be a brief essay), the aim is to consider what a cultural view of organizations might entail .

"A Cultural Perspective"

The idea of culture rests on the premise that the full meaning of things is not given a priori in the things themselves.[1] Instead, meaning results from interpretation. In a cultural view, meaning is produced through an in situ interpretive process. The process encompasses universal, cultural and individual levels of interpretation. Differences among these levels are

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outlined here and the interpretive process itself is discussed in more detail in a later section. The universal level refers to the broad set of objective or physically feasible meanings or relevances of each thing. For instance, universally speaking, dogs can be eaten, worshipped or befriended, but not flown. These basic physical constraints are what Weick (1979) has referred to as "grains of truth."

The cultural level refers to the set of potential meanings or relevances indigenous to the local social group. In one sense, this local code is a subset of the universal set of feasible relevances. In another sense, the local code is an elaboration of the universal set. Each of the objective or physically feasible meanings may be exploded into a whole range of meanings. For instance, consider the myriad social meanings of dog in our society--companion, family member, guide dog for the blind, shepherd, guard dog, drug detective. This array of meanings derives less from objective features or universal meanings of the creature dog and more from the creative differentiation from universal meanings into contextually relevant cultural meanings. The cultural code describes the repertoire of meanings that may appropriately be assigned to a thing by members of the particular social system. That, strictly speaking, dogs are befriended but not eaten or worshipped in 1980 America reflects the code for relevances for dog in our Western culture.

The final level in interpretation is the individual one. Here the person's idiosyncratic adaptation of cultural codes leads to a set of personal codes of relevance. In turn, personal codes are applied in the moment of encountering a thing and meaning is produced. Whether you greet or run from the dog in front of you at this moment depends on your history with dogs and your recognition of this one as your neighbor's friendly puppy.

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So, from the universe of feasible relevances of any thing, a cultural set of possible meanings appropriate though time and space for the social group is carved out, and based on this cultural code, social system members derive their own codes of relevance. Figure 1 shows these three levels. As indicated in the figure, the universal is akin to the etic as described by Pike (1954) and can be thought of as an objective realm. Only at the universal level is meaning given a priori. The cultural stratum corresponds to Pike's (1954) emic and can be thought of as an intersubjective realm. And the individual stratum is most nearly a subjective realm.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

With few exceptions researchers in the organizational sciences have proceeded as if study of the universal stratum alone were sufficient to produce understandings of organizational behavior. Worse still, organizational phenomena have been studied implicitly as universal matters devoid of any cultural component. However, it seems increasingly clear that much, if not most, of what matters in organizational·life takes place at the cultural level. The next two sections will consider aspects of culture relevant to a view of organizations as culture-bearing milieux. For purposes of discussion, a distinction is made between what goes on inside any one individual vis-à-vis cultural processes and what goes on outside the person, that is, between persons or more generally within the social system. The former is termed the psychological context and the latter the sociological context of culture.

The sociological context. Culture has been distinguished from the social system on the basis of the ideal versus the real in a brief but classic statement by Kroeber and Parsons (1958). They define culture as the "...transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful

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systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior..." and social system as "...the specifically relational system of interaction among individuals and collectivities" (p. 86-87). As discussed above, the codes of meaning or relevance indigenous to a social system serve as behavior-shaping social ideals (i.e., "thou shalt," "thou shalt not"). Social ideals constitute a system of values and relevances by which individuals and institutions set goals and aspirations, sanction behavior and judge performances. A set of social ideals is represented in a kind of hierarchy or prioritization of meanings, a coherent meaning system. A cultural view then encompasses the system of social ideals and the set of symbolic devices (i.e., myths, rituals, signs, metaphors, special languages) that embody and are used to convey the ideals. While these symbolic devices are used to convey the local culture, they are simultaneously the artifacts of that culture.

Culture provides for social system stability through time and space and for integration of members. Continuity of shared ideals across generations of social system members serves a transtemporal stabilizing or homeostatic function.[2] Contemporaneous stabilizing or control functions such as deviance detection and reduction are made possible by the standards or goals carried in the set of shared ideals.[3] Ouchi's (1979) work on control by clan illustrates this function. Further, shared ideals among members provide for the integration of individuals into the social group, a kind of individual to institution linking. Etzioni's (1961) work on the normative involvement of organization members illustrates this integrating function of culture.[4]

More diffusely, culture provides an identify of the social group. What we, as members, stand for (a representational meaning) and how we deal with one another and with outsiders may be conveyed through the

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culture. Discussions of corporate personality in private industry and command climate in the military are concerned with identity as conveyed by organizational culture (O'Toole, 1979).

The psychological context. At the individual level,"...human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them...," as Blumer (1969: 2) has stated. As we said earlier, meaning is the product of an in situ interpretive process. Meaning is essentially and endlessly negotiated. In one sense of negotiated, meaning production represents navigation of an experiential landscape. In the other sense of negotiated, it represents bargaining among alternative meanings differentially preferred by the various parties to an interaction.

At the micro-interactional level, the navigational aspect of the cultural processes produces the individual's definition of this immediate situation.[5] In an interaction, the person's individualized version of the local set of social ideals, his or her personal code of meanings, guides perception, interpretation and action. Through a series of steps, it allows the individual to assess whether, for instance, a particular performance constitutes a job well done. First, one's culturally derived meaning system facilitates the identification (or parsing, in Weick's (1969) terminology) of a performance from a continuous stream of experience. What is noticed is, to a great extent, given in our cultural set. Second, it directs attention to certain features of the performance considered worth assessing. Third, it provides the yardstick for assessing those features of the performance. Fourth, assessment or interpretation guides action -- responses expressed verbally and/or behaviorally are made in terms of features assessed and assessments of those features.

The psychological context of cultural processes has been discussed at length by Schutz (1970b and 1964). Schutz has shown how the individual's interpretive scheme or meaning system is embedded and operational in a particular culture. Thus, meaning is extensively intersubjective.[6]

Figure 2 reviews the elements of a cultural perspective outlined so far.

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INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE
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Culture in organizational settings. Several ways in which organizations can be viewed as culture-bearing milieux are explored in this section. An individual may be a member of a social system and its culture by virtue of regular ongoing physical presence and participation in face-to-face interactions with other members. Or, one may be a member of a culture by virtue of affiliation without necessarily being physically present in a face-to-face interaction system. For instance, being a member of the Academy of Management constitutes membership in a social system which convenes in the strict physical sense only once a year. Yet the culture of the Academy of Management seems clearly distinguishable from the culture of the Association for Humanistic Psychology or other professional groups. Further, membership by affiliation may be purely informal, as in the case of "regulars" at the culture-rich Monterey Jazz Festival, which convenes 3 days per year and has done so for more than 20 years. Thus, in two distinct ways, as opportunities for affiliation and as physically convening social systems, organizations can be seen as culture-bearing milieux.

An individual may be a member of a social system and participate superficially or deeply in the local culture. What determines the level of cultural membership is the individual's self-perception. This is particularly

true when we consider cultures in work organizations as opposed to national and ethnic group cultures. In contrast with participation in an ethnic or other culture of birth, participation in an organizational culture seems more temporary or transitory and more a matter of voluntary choice (though not necessarily the product of a conscious rational decision process). In determining whether an individual is a participant in a particular culture the key question is, Does the person consider himself a member?

In addition, adequate grasp of the local intersubjective or social reality is necessary in order for the individual to function within the culture. Has the person sufficiently mastered the culture, that is, internalized core ideals and values, appreciated key symbols?

In an organizational setting, the definition of a situation by an individual may be guided by several nested and/or overlapping cultural systems. These may be differentially dominant depending on the individual, his or her tenure in the social system, the congruence among cultural systems, the situation to be defined, etc.

For instance, incongruence between overlapping cultures may result for individuals who have both professional and organizational affiliations (e.g. an attorney or CPA working at GM corporate headquarters). Similarly nested cultures can exert incompatible pulls on individuals. This is illustrated in the case of the division manager torn between loyalty to his division and loyalty to the company, particularly when performance is assessed at divisional profit centers. Such situations have been studied in terms of role conflict and organizational commitment without adequate attention to relevant cultural elements. The prevalence of nested and overlapping cultures (by affiliation and/or physical colocation) and the self-perceptual nature of cultural membership indicate the need to clarify issues of boundary and perspec-

tive in conducting organizational research. In studying culture, especially when organizations are studied at a distance, from the outside (Evered and Louis, 1980), one can't tell whether a particular boundary, e.g. the IBM culture as a whole, is a meaningful level of analysis, a substantially rich culture in comparison with other nested or overlapping cultures, e.g. the culture of IBM systems engineers in which individuals are simultaneously members. As well, different members of IBM may consider different boundaries relevant; they may consider their dominant affiliation at the organization-wide or subunit or functional specialty level. The challenge, then, is to identify which culture(s) is being studied and from whose points of view.

In addition to the organizational phenomena previously identified (e.g. control systems, nature of involvement, role conflict, organizational/professional commitment), a number of other phenomena imply that cultural processes are present in organizations and suggest vehicles for studying culture in organizations. For instance, organizational climate has dealt at least conceptually almost directly with culture in organizations. Unfortunately, however, climate has been treated operationally and methodologically as a universal and/or an individual phenomenon, but not to my knowledge as a cultural phenomenon. In a different vein, a cultural view would lend support to MBO. The integration of goal setting and performance feedback in MBO seems a natural formalization and personalization of cultural features including the functions of shared social ideals in guiding and assessing members' actions. And, finally, points of differentiation and integration reveal new and evolving cultural milieux and potential for cultural classes between interdependent but differentiated subunits.

Conclusion

In this essay I have proposed that organizations be viewed as culture-bearing milieux. The essential ingredients of a cultural perspective were

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outlined and a number of organizational phenomena implicated in a cultural perspective were identified. A key premise of a cultural view is that meaning is intersubjectively negotiated. It was proposed that shared social ideals or systems of relevance and symbol systems for conveying them (languages and metaphors) are indigenous to social systems in organizations, as elsewhere; and that these aid members in interpreting experience, facilitate expression and guide behavior.

Conceptual development is needed to flesh out a cultural perspective. In addition, methods for studying cultural phenomena in organizations must be carefully considered to avoid the hazards of objectifying intersubjective phenomena and overlooking critical issues of boundary and perspective. As a help in developing appropriate methods, we might study ethnographic methods which aim specifically at tapping the perspective of the social system member.

Culture in organizations needs to be studied both as a primary focus and as an additional level of analysis in organizational studies. As a primary focus, evolution of culture could be examined by studying the initial convening and early history of a social system. Pettigrew (1979), in tracing the development of a newly established organization, illustrates this type of study. The start of a project team, the commissioning and initial manning of a new ship in the Navy, and the beginning of classes each semester, are all situations in which the evolution of culture in organizations can be studied. And alteration of culture could be examined by mapping what happens when a new CEO takes over in an industrial organization, or a new commanding officer takes over in a military organization.

I close this essay by suggesting a final rationale for adding a view of organizations as culture-bearing milieux to our repertoire of perspectives on organizations. Historically, organizational scientists have adopted a

reductionistic approach in studying organizational phenomena. Parts and pieces have been studied; 2 to 5 variable causal models have predominated. Results and conclusions about organizational functioning drawn from such research have been weak and necessarily tentative. Perhaps progress in the organizational sciences has suffered due to a pattern of pursuing the whole by exclusively examining the parts, without a balanced recognition that the whole, especially in the case of organizations, is greater than the sum of the parts. In contrast to the traditional reductionistic approach, considerations of culture require, support and themselves imply a more gestaltic and integrative approach to studying organizational phenomena. The themes and images characterizing particular cultures are lost when examined piecemeal. When considered as a whole, the character of a culture is rather readily detected, for instance, through its imprint on social system members. In sum then, a cultural perspective might help us to move from a fairly exclusive reliance on a reductionistic approach to more diverse and, in particular, more gestaltic or holistic approaches to organizational inquiry.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The ideas in this section have been stimulated by a variety of writings in cultural anthropology, sociology, linguistics and philosophy. The approaches taken by Dewey (1933), Schutz (1964, 1970a, 1970b), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Geertz (1973), Thomas (1951) and Ball (1972) have been particularly influential in the development of my perspective. I have tried in this initial discussion to avoid the nuance and sometimes hair-splitting debates that may necessarily come with later discussions of the subject. For basic background material on anthropological approaches to meaning and culture, see Hammel and Simmons (1970), Spradley (1972), Gamst and Norbeck (1976). And Nida (1964) provides a helpful and detailed discussion of linguistic, referential and emotive phases of meaning, illustrating one framework for analyzing meaning.

[2]See Buckelly (1967: 206) for a discussion of the systemic origins of this function.

[3]McHugh's (1968) temporal and spatial themes are analogous at the individual level to what is suggested here at the social system level.

[4]This emphasis on stabilizing functions of culture is not meant to suggest that cultural systems are static. On the contrary, they are more appropriately viewed as in-process, evolving and emergent. For example, the changing attitudes toward career/family tradeoffs that are being reflected in changes in work cultures in America illustrate the evolving character of culture.

[5]"The definition of the situation" is used here to refer to the meanings given by the individual to particular experiences in an immediate sense, that is, in the moment of experience, rather than to refer to some broader meaning that the setting and social system typically have for the individual.

[6]Others, including McHugh (1968), Blumer (1969) and Van Maanen (1977), have dealt with psychological aspects of meaning, but from a much more subjective and individual perspective than the cultural view I wish to develop here.

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Universal
Objective
(etic)

Cultural
Intersubjective
(emic)

Individual
Subjective

Figure 1.   Levels of Interpretation in Producing Meaning

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SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT   PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

SHARED IDEALS   SYMBOLIC DEVICES   INTERPRETIVE SCHEME   NEGOTIATION AS
    Cultural system   Personal system   Navigation
    of relevances   of relevances   Bargaining

    • Continuity – transtemporal stability   • Definition of situations
    • Control – contemporaneous stability   • Behavior guide
    • Integration of individual members
    • Identity of social group

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                                                        In an immediate situation:

                                                    Perception → Interpretation → Meaning ⇒
                                                    Definition of situation → Behavior

Figure 2.   Elements of a Cultural Perspective

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