

# The Role Of Organizational Culture On A Subculture Of Feedback

*Sylvia J. Hysong*

## Keywords

*Audit and feedback, organizational culture, primary health care, qualitative methods, ATLAS.ti*

## Abstract

Organizational culture has long been studied in relationship to organizational performance, though this relationship has not been established consistently. Martin (2002) suggested the simultaneous existence of a general culture, and multiple, context-specific subcultures in an organization. Are subcultures simply context-specific reflections of the larger organizational culture? Or do they serve as potential moderators of the relationship between the larger organizational culture and organizational performance? To explore this question, we employed ATLAS.ti 6.2 to conduct a content analysis of organizational culture at four United States Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMCs).

Sites were selected purposely based on their performance on 15 clinical measures. At each facility we conducted one-hour telephone interviews of the facility director, the director of primary care, and one full-time primary care physician and nurse. Participants answered questions about the types of clinical performance information they receive, and seek out, the utility of such data, and how they use said information.

Each site's culture was highly distinct. However, despite these differences across sites, the mirror relationship between organizational culture and feedback subculture was present in all four sites, suggesting the subculture is a reflection of the parent culture.

## Background

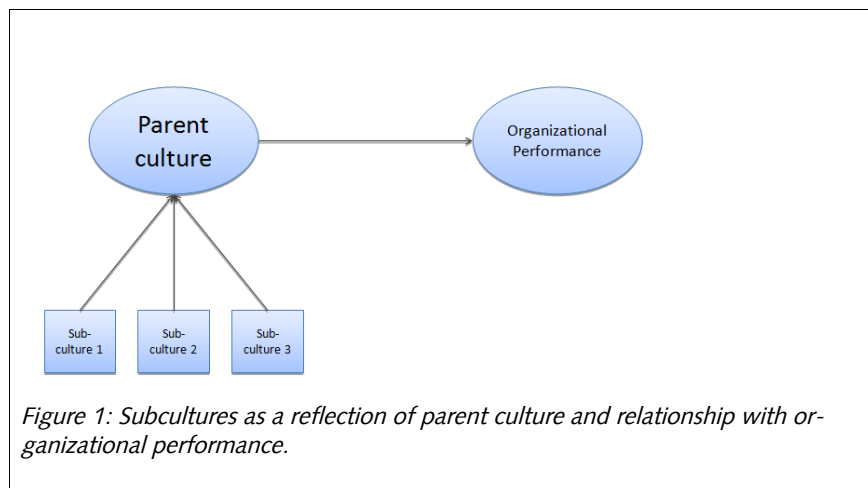
Organizational culture has long been studied in relationship to organizational performance, though this relationship has not been established consistently (Schein, 2004; Wilderom, Glunk, & Mazlowski, 2000). Nonetheless, advances have been made along this line of research; among the clearest, most illuminating studies is Hartnell and colleagues' (2011) meta-analysis testing the predictions of the Competing Values Framework (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) as a way to test the relationship between organizational culture and organizational performance. Said framework contends that two dimensions, external vs. internal focus and flexibility vs. control, can be used to describe four types of organizational cultures: clans (flexibility/internal focus), hierarchies (control/internal focus), adhocracies (flexibility/external focus), and markets (control/external focus). Hartnell and colleagues found, as predicted, that the culture types proposed by the competing values framework performed best at the types of effectiveness criteria most ideally suited for their culture type (e.g., satisfaction and commitment for clan cultures, efficiency and timeliness for hierarchies).

In parallel to the research examining organizational culture and performance, Martin (2002) proposed a three-perspective theory of culture: the integration perspective, suggesting the existence of a general, unitary organizational culture; the fragmentation perspective, which suggests different people in different parts of the organization are unlikely to have a shared meaning as the integration perspective suggests;

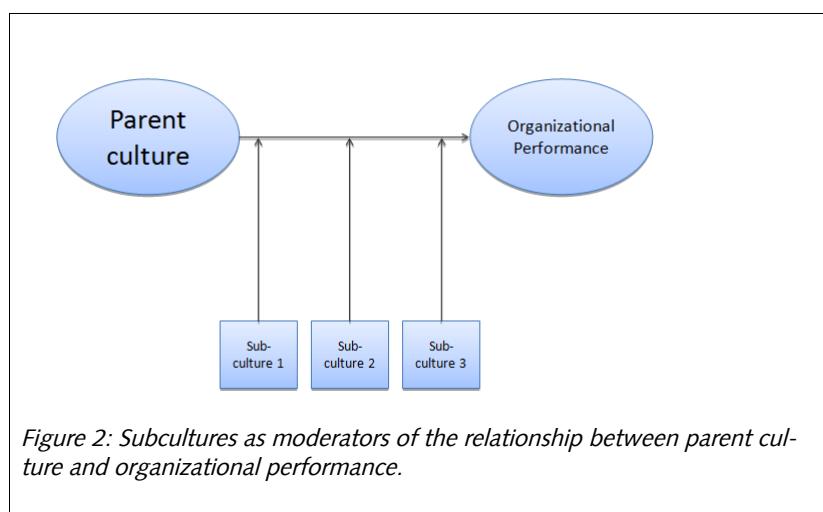
and the differentiation perspective, which suggests the existence of multiple, context-specific yet coherent subcultures in an organization (a compromise of sorts between integration and fragmentation) ;Martin proposes that there is some of each perspective in every organization, the distribution of which is moderated by the concept of “culture strength” (the robustness or consistency of the shared meanings across contexts). This idea has received some support in the literature (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). However, the relationship between the larger organizational culture and its subcultures is unclear; for example, are subcultures simply context-specific reflections of the larger organizational culture? Or do they serve as potential moderators of the relationship between the larger organizational culture and organizational performance, as is the case with culture strength?

In this qualitative research we examine the relationship between organizational culture and a subculture of feedback, via a grounded theory analysis of four U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMCs) that differ markedly in organizational performance. A subculture of feedback is a particularly useful subculture to study because the act and consequences of feedback are heavily dependent on culturally based phenomena such as communication norms and organizational policies. If subcultures (such as a culture for feedback or for safety) are simply context-specific reflections of the larger subculture, parallel concepts should be observable between a subculture and its parent culture, regardless of culture type (see Figure 1). For example, an organization who is generally hierarchical and places great value on monitoring numerical metrics for assessing the company's overall performance might also adopt implement highly numerical, quantitative data driven approaches to delivering feedback.

If on the other hand, subcultures are more akin to moderators, then either the nature or strength of the relationship between an organization's culture and organizational performance should vary depending on



the nature of the sub-culture. For example, parent culture strength could be directly related to organizational performance in organizations whose subcultures are congruent with the parent culture, yet inversely related in organizations whose subcultures are discordant with the parent organizational culture.



## Method

This study is a secondary analysis of a purposive subset of telephone interviews from a larger, currently ongoing government-funded study examining differences in mental models, strategies, and clinical performance feedback characteristics of high and low performing

VAMCs (Hysong, 2012). The methods have been published elsewhere (Hysong, Teal, Khan, & Haidet, 2012); relevant portions are summarized here.

## Site Selection

Sites were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on 15 outpatient clinical performance measures. For this study, we identified one high, one low, and two moderately performing (consistently average, one highly variable) facilities. Moderate performers were defined as facilities that fell between the 35th and 65th percentiles on the average of the 15 applied clinical performance measures. Our *consistently average facility* was the moderate performer with the lowest variance amongst its 15 performance measure scores; our *highly variable facility* was that with the highest variance. All four sites were considered hierarchies according to the Competing Values Framework, all of them having a high internal focus striving for high levels of control.

## Data Collection

We interviewed four informants at each facility: the facility director, the associate chief of staff (ACOS) for primary care, one full-time primary care physician, and one full-time primary care nurse,<sup>1</sup> each with at least three years in their current position. Participants were telephone interviewed individually for one hour. Participants answered questions about the types of clinical performance information they receive and actively seek out, attitudes about the utility of such data, and how they use the information they receive/seek out.

<sup>1</sup>At one facility we were unable to secure a nurse interview.

## Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using techniques adapted content analysis (Weber, 1990) using ATLAS.ti 6.2 (Muhr, 2004). All research team members were blinded to the sites' performance category.

A team of four trained coders open-coded the transcripts. Each transcript was reviewed by a pair of coders; coding assignments were distributed such as to maximize number of different coders reviewing the transcripts of any given site. For purposes of this study, coders were asked specifically to identify passages indicative of organizational culture, and passages indicative of feedback culture (norms, attitudes, or behavior patterns indicative of the value of feedback at the facility) during the open coding phase. To identify these two constructs, coders received a detailed definition of elements indicative of culture as defined by Schein (2004 – see Appendix). Using the coding tool in ATLAS.ti, coders assigned a code of organizational culture to any quotation matching one or more of the elements in the definition; a code of feedback culture was assigned to any quotation matching one or more elements in the definition that specifically discussed feedback norms or processes.

Coding disagreements were resolved by consensus between the two coders reviewing the transcript; any disagreements that could not be resolved in this manner were then resolved by the entire team, with the principal investigator (the author of this paper) making the final decision if necessary.

Using the families filter in the primary document manager and the "Quotations for Selected Code" command in the Code Manager, the author generated lists of quotations for feedback culture and organizational culture, respectively, for each site. These lists were then used as primary documents in a new, *tabula rasa* open coding process. The author reviewed the primary documents, identified emergent themes, and assigned them new codes; these codings organized them by site, culture, and subculture using filters and searches, and organizing them as memos in the Memo Manager. Memos were also used to elaborate descriptions of each site's organizational and feedback cultures. A second team member reviewed this second stage analysis for concurrence.

## Results

Table 1 summarizes each site's principal culture and feedback culture characteristics. As shown in the table, each site's culture is highly distinct despite all four sites being classifiable as hierarchies; further, sites were specifically selected for their differences in clinical performance, making their performance also highly distinct. However, despite these marked differences across sites, the mirror relationship between organizational culture and feedback subculture is present in all four sites, suggesting the subculture is a reflection of the parent culture.

Site	Organizational Culture	Feedback Subculture
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High personal rapport</li> <li>• High interpersonal interaction</li> <li>• Belief in professionalism and working “at the top of your license”</li> <li>• High degree of team discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong dialogue amongst colleagues</li> <li>• Peer feedback program in which colleagues trust and feel safe</li> <li>• Colleagues back each other up because everyone is accountable for performance measures (facility performance is a reflection on all)</li> </ul>
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low morale</li> <li>• High turnover in leadership and clinicians</li> <li>• Clear rift and mistrust between leadership and clinicians</li> <li>• Clinicians feel “forced to fraud”</li> <li>• Low, rigid interaction and communication between leadership and clinicians</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback not perceived as meaningful by clinicians;</li> <li>• Approach to feedback perceived as “data-based” by leadership, inaccurate and punitive by clinicians</li> <li>• Disagreements/grievances must go through union; no informal communication channels</li> </ul>
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies, resources, and constraints created by Central Office</li> <li>• Communications primarily top-down</li> <li>• Belief that facility and personnel should not be held accountable for phenomena perceived to be beyond their control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback part of regular, standardized reports and annual reviews dictated by Central Office</li> <li>• Belief that suboptimal performance is somewhat acceptable when aspects of the performance metric are beyond performer's control</li> </ul>
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly centralized, top-down</li> <li>• Focus on consistency of message and action from leadership</li> <li>• Striving for stability and consistency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback communications, education about performance measurement highly centralized, top down</li> <li>• Focus on being factual, transparent, fair</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of Organizational and Feedback Culture Themes, by Site.

## Discussion

This qualitative research sought to explore the relationship between organizational culture elements and their impact on a subculture of feedback at four highly distinct VAMCs. Based on our analysis, we suggest that feedback subculture was a direct reflection of the larger organizational culture, rather than a potential moderator of culture. Our findings are consistent with Martin's concept of differentiation, in the sense that each site's subculture of feedback is context specific, yet coherent relative to the larger organizational culture. This is also consistent with the broader concept of anchoring and adjustment, a cognitive tactic (and often a source of bias) where an individual uses an implicit starting value to form an opinion or make a decision and makes adjustments to that starting point to form their final opinion or decision; consequently, the starting value is of paramount importance. Analogously, in the organizational culture context, the broader organizational culture could be said to act as the anchor from which the

context-specific subcultures tend to adjust and form. Thus, as our findings highlight, the nature and strength of the larger organizational culture becomes of paramount importance to the smaller, context-specific subcultures.

### Limitations

Coders were blinded to the sites' performance category during analysis, thus it was not possible to link cultural characteristics to organizational performance. In addition, our study was not originally designed to assess organizational culture, but is rather a secondary analysis of an existing data set. Consequently, we were limited in our assessments of organizational culture by the questions asked and responses obtained during the interviews.

### Future Directions

This study was a first attempt at relating subcultures with the parent organizational culture, and suggests organizations should pay close attention to the impact their overall culture makes on smaller pockets of the organization. These findings need to be replicated with more hypothesis-testing approaches. Future research should also examine whether certain types of subcultures (e.g., subcultures by profession) might serve more as moderators between culture and performance than other types of subcultures (e.g., subcultures by strategic focus).

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### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank Melissa Knox, Richard SoRelle, Kristen Broussard Smitham, and Khai-El Johnson for their contributions in conducting the interviews and initial organization of the data for this paper, and for their critiques and suggestions during the revision process.

The research reported here was supported by the US Department of Veterans Affairs Health Services Research and Development Service (grant nos. IIR 09–095, CD2-07-0181) and partly supported by the facilities and resources of the Houston VA HSR&D Center of Excellence (COE) (HFP 90–020). Dr. Hysong is a health services researcher at the Houston VA HSR&D COE (now the Center of Innovations in Quality Safety and Effectiveness) and an assistant professor of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. The salaries of the author and her research team were supported in part by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of Baylor College of Medicine, the Department of Veterans Affairs, or the US government.

The author and her research team declare that they do not have a conflict of interest.

### **Appendix. Definitional Material For Organizational Culture**

Coders were provided with the following table to aid them in identifying interview material that was descriptive of the organizational and feedback culture at the facility. For organizational culture, coders were asked to assign a code to a quote if it matched any of the categories listed below. For feedback culture, they were to assign a code to a quote if it matched any of the categories listed below and they were specifically referring to feedback norms or processes.

Exhibit 1.1 Various Categories Used to Describe Culture; Reprinted from Schein, 2004.

- *Observed Behavioral* regularities when people interact: the language they use, the customs and traditions that evolve, and the rituals they employ in a wide variety of situations
- *Group Norms*: the implicit standards and values that evolve in working groups, such as the particular norm of “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” that evolved among workers in the Bank Wiring Room in the Hawthorn studies
- *Espoused values*: the articulated, publicly announced principles and values that the group claims to be trying to achieve, such as “product quality” or “price leadership”
- *Formal philosophy*: the broad policies and ideological principles that guide a group’s actions toward stockholders, employees, customers, and other stakeholders...
- *Rules of the game*: the implicit, unwritten rules for getting along in the organization; “the ropes” that a newcomer must learn in order to become an accepted member; “the way we do things around here”.

- *Climate*: the feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or other outsiders
- *Embedded skills*: the special competencies displayed by group members in accomplishing certain tasks, the ability to make certain things that gets passed on from generation to generation without necessarily being articulated in writing.
- *Habits of thinking, mental models, and linguistic paradigms*: the shared cognitive frames that guide the perceptions, thought, and language used by the members of a group and taught to new members in the early socialization process.
- *Shared meanings*: the emergent understandings created by group members as they interact with each other.
- *"Root metaphors" or integrating symbols*: the ways in which groups evolve to characterize themselves, which may or may not be appreciated consciously but become embodied in buildings, office layout, and other materials artifacts of the group. This level of culture reflects the emotional and aesthetic response of members as contrasted with the cognitive or evaluative response.
- *Formal rituals and celebrations*: the ways in which a group celebrates key events that reflect important values or important "passages" by members, such as a promotion, completion of important projects, and milestones.

### **Sylvia J. Hysong**

Research Health Scientist / Assistant Professor of Medicine, VA Medical Center / Baylor College of Medicine, (MEDVAMC 152), 2002 Holcombe Blvd., Houston, TX 77030. Email: [sylvia.hysong@va.gov](mailto:sylvia.hysong@va.gov) / [hysong@bcm.edu](mailto:hysong@bcm.edu).  
Phone/Fax: 713-794-8616 / 713-748-7359

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