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Unpacking Organizational Culture

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❖ CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

If an organization's culture emerges from the complex and continuous web of communication among members of the organization, then what exactly is a culture? Rather than being something tangible or something that someone can easily point to, *organizational culture* is the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members. In other words, an organization's culture is its belief system—created and managed by the organization's members. Using a communicative perspective, organizational culture has five important characteristics: it is inextricably linked to organizational members; dynamic, not static; composed of competing assumptions and values; emotionally charged; and both foreground and background for an organization's communication. Each of these is explained below.

Inextricably Linked to Organizational Members

First, organizational culture cannot exist independently of the organizational members who create it. Nor is organizational culture a result

of the actions of one organizational member (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Everyone who participates in the organization symbolically and socially constructs the culture. While it may seem that organizational members react to an existing culture, all organizational members, by virtue of their interactions, help develop or sustain it. Think of an organization as having a language system with its own specialized symbols and vernacular. People who comprise this language system produce a set of typical actions or normative procedures and a set of explanations for those actions and procedures. Often, these take on the form of stories or myths about *how work is done* or *what it means to work here*. When new members join the organization, current members use these stories and myths to explain the job and the organization. In one sense, culture is inherited from the community—in this case, previous and current organizational members—who comprise the language system (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). However, as new members learn the language system, and adopt the stories and myths, they have the potential to alter them or create new ones. Thus, an organization's culture is a mix of accepted practices by a collective and is dependent on organizational members, past and present (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Dynamic, Not Static

Second, an organization's culture is dynamic, not static (Trice & Beyer, 1993). This happens largely because there is an infinite number of combinations of verbal and nonverbal messages that can be sent and received (Bantz, 1993). Even when managers try to direct an organization's culture, employees can accept, reject, or in some way modify these cultural directives. Moreover, organizational culture is not developed from the isolated interactions of any two organizational members, regardless of their level. Multiple dyads, triads, and small groups interact in a variety of ways, creating a synergy that is impossible to fully predict (Bantz, 1993). Of course, organizational membership is also not static. Organizational cultures change as people come into and out of organizations. Essentially, an organization's culture can change as organizational members change their belief systems or modify norms.

An organization's culture can also change as executives address internal problems and opportunities or as organizations respond to or create their external environments. For example, Larson and Pepper (2003) describe value change at JAR Technologies, an aerospace company. Over time JAR had grown into a medium-sized company that designed and produced one-of-a-kind instruments for government and commercial customers. As the government space market shrunk, the global commercial space market expanded, causing JAR to reprioritize

its values to meet the demands of its commercial customers. While some employees embraced the new vision, others with longer tenure fought to retain the values and practices that helped make the company successful with government contracts. Many employees were able to manage the internal pressures related to the market shift experienced by the organization. Still, some long-term employees did leave the company because they could not identify with the new values.

Alvesson (2002) uses the term *cultural traffic* to describe the variety of influences on organizational culture. Not only is culture influenced by people entering and leaving the organization, organizational culture is also influenced by societal values. "Changes regarding environmental protection, gender and ethnic relations, age, attitudes toward work, new ideas on business and management, and so on, affect people not only outside but also inside their workplaces" (p. 160).

Because change can occur in so many venues—the manner in which messages intersect and are interpreted, fluctuations in membership, or revisions of organizational goals—the type and level of change is variable. Changes to an ongoing culture may be significant departures from existing practices or subtle variations that build over time into a new way of doing things. Regardless of their source, quality, intensity, or direction, changes in organizational culture are inherent to the process of organizing.

Competing Values and Assumptions

Third, there may be multiple and potentially competing patterns of values and assumptions. From any one position in the organization, it may look like the culture is consistently singular. However, it is more typical for organizations to structure themselves into networks based on tasks, relationships, information, and functions with organizational members identifying with, and belonging to, more than one network (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). As a result, organizational members have the opportunity to create many belief systems, or subcultures, with both overlapping and distinguishing elements. At the center of the organization's culture, clarity may reign, but at the periphery, competing assumptions and values create a fuzziness where assumptions and values are contradictory (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Two reasons account for this potential. First, recall that organizations emerge from the interactions of their members. And, second, while organizational members commonly take on the vernacular and linguistic forms of the organization, individuals can also modify the vernacular and linguistic forms, as well as create new vernacular and linguistic forms as new situations arise.

For example, when a retail store moves from being physically located in a geographical space to being an online retailer, it is also becoming a technology company. Different sets of employees will view this move in different ways. Technology employees whose day-to-day work creates the e-commerce, or e-tailing, software will likely view this organizational change differently than employees whose work has been tied to face-to-face interactions with customers. Some employees will view this move to add an e-commerce side of the business as progressive, innovative, and necessary for maintaining its market position. Others are likely to view this move as risky. These two sets of employees will create their own interpretations and explanations of the e-commerce addition, and these explanations will find their way into the conversations of employees.

From one event, two explanations emerge, each seen as valid by the organizational community that contributes to and maintains a particular view. Continuing this hypothetical situation further, the two views of the organization's culture have the potential to become further entrenched and more distinguished as interdependencies between the two groups encourage employee debate about the e-commerce addition. Worse, if information about the technology move is not shared with employees on the retail side of the operation, there is the potential for these employees to create a cultural view consistent with their organizational position and not one grounded in the realities of the e-commerce activities.

Also recall that organizational members can identify with and belong to more than one network or group. You may identify with your work group that values doing just enough work to get by. At the same time you could identify with a social group at work that is based on common values—and one of those values is to be productive at all tasks. As an employee, you structure your work activities and your communication about those activities to address and manage this competing set of beliefs. Of course, your strength of identification with these two groups is changeable based on situational elements and communication within the groups (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). For example, if your work group adopts a value that you believe is unethical, you are likely to weaken your identification with that group and those beliefs, while you strengthen your identification with the other group.

Emotionally Charged

Fourth, the meanings that create organizational culture are by definition not neutral. Artifacts, values, and assumptions that carry cultural

meaning also carry the emotions organizational members experience in their work and express about their work environments. Indeed, artifacts, values, and assumptions are only meaningful if we have some feeling or emotion about the artifact and what it means, positively or negatively. Clearly, emotion influences how we make sense of our work environments (Weick, 1995). For example, an assumption about how one works, if questioned, will likely draw emotion from the organizational member defending the practice. Such emotions can be heightened when employees report that they are more identified with their work role than with family roles (Hochschild, 1997).

Emotions—positive and negative—are prevalent in all work contexts (Miller, 2002). Indeed, Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) claim that emotion saturates our work experiences. One need not work as a 911 emergency responder, a first grade teacher, or a flight attendant to experience emotion at work. In performing emotional labor jobs like the three just described, emotions are likely to be more heightened, and more controlled, by the organization as it demands the performance or management of certain emotions or feelings to meet organizational and role expectations (Sutton, 1991). However, employees express genuine and spontaneous emotion in their relationships with other organizational members (Waldron, 2000), or about their work, in all types of work environments. The emotions organizational members express—or control—influence the cultural meanings or cultural norms derived from those interactions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Callahan, 2002). Thus, organizational culture is emotionally charged (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Foreground and Background

Fifth, organizational culture is simultaneously the foreground and the background of organization life. Organizational members make sense of their current interactions—the foreground—based on their understanding of the existing culture—the background. At the same time, current communication creates, enhances, sustains, or contradicts the existing culture, which in turn creates a new background against which future interactions are interpreted. This cycle is continuous and never complete. As a result, organizational culture is a representation of the social order of an organization.

Organizational culture emerges from the interactions of organizational members as they use messages and symbols to pursue their personal and professional goals and objectives relative to the organization's goals and objectives. The interaction that is required to make an organization function creates the organizational reality in which people

work. That is, organizational culture is communicatively constructed (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Smircich, 1983). So while we may commonly talk about an organization as a thing, from this perspective its members communicatively construct it, and the interactions of its members create its social and symbolic reality (Bantz, 1993). Simply stated, language use and other communicative performances drive organizational culture. What is said and done, and how it is said and done in the present, is interpreted by organizational members against what was said and done, and how it was said and done in the past, to create the culture. The process is a continuous communicative performance. As Alvesson argues, "culture is not primarily 'inside' people's heads, but somewhere 'between' the heads of a group of people where symbols and meanings are publicly expressed, e.g., in work group interactions, in board meetings but also in material objects" (2002, p. 4).

Symbols, messages, and meaning are inherent parts of the communicative processes that create an organization. Individuals use symbols—words, behaviors, and objects—to create messages. Meanings are created as messages—sent and received—and are interpreted by organizational members. Through this process, organizational culture is symbolically performed (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

❖ COMMUNICATING CULTURE

Two examples explain how organizational members use symbols, messages, and meanings to communicate (and create) their organizational cultures. In the first example, imagine that you have just been hired as a manager of a credit card product with a large financial services organization. To socialize you to your new position and the organization, you are required to attend a weeklong orientation program at the corporate office. The day before you go, the assistant vice president who hired you presents you with a company laptop loaded with all of the company's formal documents: the company's mission statement and its history, a glossary of industry relevant terms, a description of the protocols you are to follow in developing and marketing products, and a complete set of the company's policies. As he hands you the laptop, he gives you his "going to orientation" speech, which is meant to encourage you and demonstrate that you are already a valued member of the organization.

In this case, the symbols—the laptop with the organization's logo, the documents loaded on the laptop, and the words your manager uses in giving you the laptop—create messages. Some of the messages are

intentional. For example, the documents that describe the policies and protocols are clear and direct. Without question, you are to follow these. Some of the policies even include messages about the consequences if you do not. Other symbols create unintentional messages. The sleekness of the laptop with its state-of-the-art technology sends a message that working for this financial services company is serious business. Moreover, the symbols associated with the costs of you attending a weeklong orientation rather than developing new customer groups for the company create a message that there is a great deal to learn about being a manager in this company.

Meanings are created as you interpret these messages singly and collectively. It is important here to recognize that multiple meanings can exist from the same set of messages. While it is likely that you and others going through the orientation will create similar meanings from the experience, it is unlikely that everyone will create the same meanings. Your previous experiences, motivation for and interest in doing this job for this organization, and your relationship with your superior are just some of the elements that are unique to you and can result in creating meanings that differ from others at the same orientation.

How did the symbols, messages, and meanings contribute to the creation of culture? The interaction between you and the assistant vice president was a dialogue. Although you might not have said much, just by nodding your head and mumbling "okay" and "yes sir," you were an integral part of the interaction. In this interaction, your boss raised your awareness about certain organizational norms (new employees are sent to orientation) and jargon (calling the orientation "the program"). Coupled with his telling you a story about his orientation, your boss passed along cultural elements to you. When you meet the other new employees at the orientation it is likely that you will talk about your experiences as new employees, what you think of your respective bosses and the organization, and how you are evaluating your experiences at the orientation. These conversations function to pass along additional cultural elements and to help you identify and interpret cultural patterns. Once you have completed the new employee orientation and are in the position of explaining it to subsequent new employees, you will reinforce, or question and revise, some aspects of these cultural elements. In turn, the norms, jargon, and stories about new employee orientation will be affirmed or reconstituted.

In a second example, dialogue among organizational members at the Pacifica Radio Foundation's Board of Directors Meeting demonstrates the process through which symbols, messages, and meanings are derived from the existing organizational culture and the way in

which challenges sustain cultural elements or allow for the potential creation of new ones. These processes are revealed as meeting participants discuss procedures for installing new board members.

Chairwoman Berry: Well, for purposes of moving the meeting along, since I would assume that there is no objection to her [a new representative] being here, if you want to vote on it, you can. I'm assuming everybody would vote that it's fine. [Pause] But it is my understanding that she does not have to be voted on unless somebody—and somebody needs to look at this language. And I don't know who the somebody is. When I say "somebody," who is the somebody I'm talking about that will look at this language and clarify it?

Ms. Brooks: The attorney has looked at it and felt that it needed clarification, and that was appropriate in this bylaw change. And if we don't adopt this bylaw change, we do need to incorporate that.

Chairwoman Berry: The attorney has already looked at it and made that recommendation to us as simply saying that it was unclear.

Ms. Makela: Regardless of whether we need to or not, I would like to recommend that we elect our newest representative since everyone else in my five-year experience has been elected to the board.

Chairwoman Berry: Well, would you be willing to change your motion to say, without regard to whether or not it is a required procedure, for the time being you would like to move the following?

Ms. Makela: Yes.

The words spoken, and the nonverbals that are not captured as part of the written transcript, are the symbols used to create messages in this meeting. In this case, the statement, "The attorney has already looked at it and made that recommendation to us as simply saying that it was unclear," is a message. Its meaning depends on the messages before and after it, who delivers and receives this particular message and the other messages, and the organizational values and assumption against which the messages are interpreted.

Taken out of context, it is difficult to understand these interactions. But upon locating the interaction within the organization's culture—such as informal expectations about meeting behavior or formalized meeting procedures or rules—meanings become clearer. The interactions of organizational members are interpreted within the organization's past, its present, and its future. The message, "Regardless of whether we need to or not, I would like to recommend that we elect our newest representative since everyone else in my five-year experience has been elected to the board," reflects a norm of this organization. This statement reaffirms the norm, and it presents a recommendation for action in the present at the meeting. The present action proposed appears to be consistent with the board's past actions, and it would likely confirm the precedence that such actions be handled this way in the future. Thus, the cycle of drawing on past cultural elements, passing them along in interaction, affirming patterns of behavior, and augmenting the belief system about electing new board representatives happens very quickly.
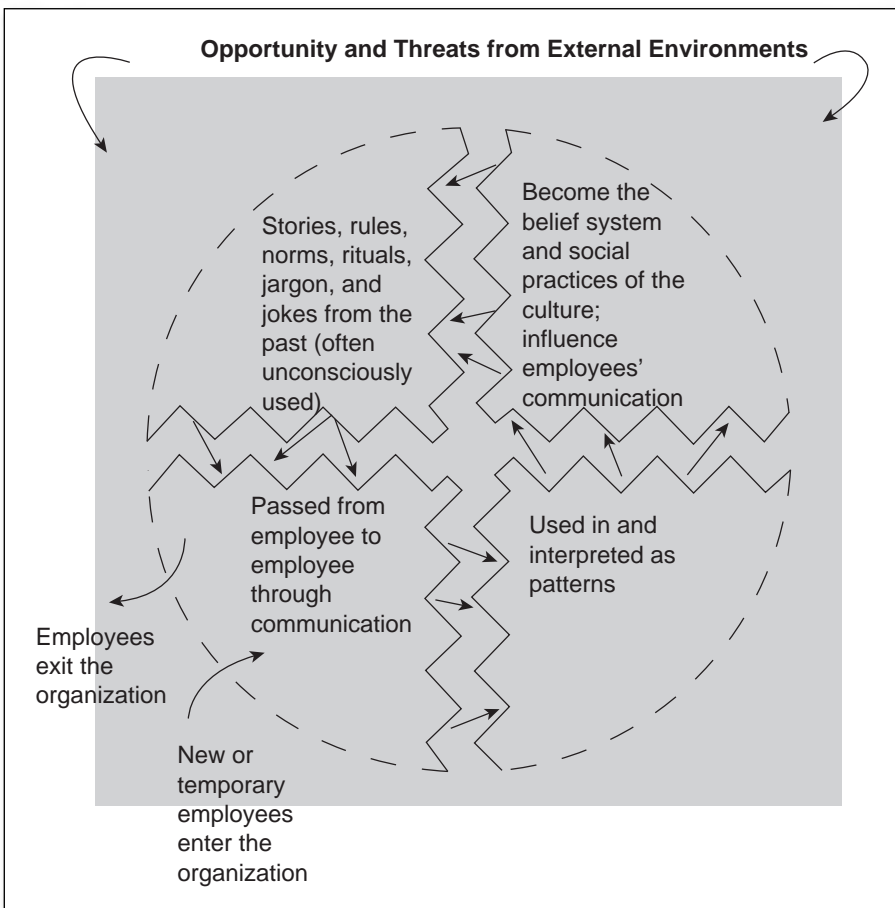
In both of these examples, organizational members are simultaneously responding to and creating the social and symbolic reality of the organizations' cultures. From the social and symbolic realities of all organizational members, an organizational culture emerges. Thus, organizational culture is communicatively constructed. It is both the process of interacting and the product of those interactions. This position recognizes that any particular message or meaning does not come with a predetermined interpretation. All organizational members create messages and meanings in concert with one another (Bantz, 1993). The strategic and spontaneous, intentional and unintentional, formal and informal, and verbal and nonverbal interactions of organizational members create an organization's culture.

Figure 2.1 provides a visual explanation of the fluid relationship between communication and culture, demonstrates the continuous cycle, and identifies the links among the past, present, and future. Culture can morph and change as employees move in and out of the organizational system and as the organization addresses new opportunities or threats from its environment. This creates opportunities for new practices to emerge, to become patterned, and to be accepted as part of the culture.

Such a model acknowledges organizational culture scholars' assumptions about communication in an organization and its relationship to organizational culture (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Andrews, 1998). That is:

1. Communication creates and recreates organizational reality.

2. Meaning is constructed in local, social, and historical contexts—that is, meanings can be different for different organizational members; they are located in the public dialogue among organizational members and are influenced by past meanings.

3. Different groups and individuals in organizations construct their view of the organization and its activities differently. Each of these alternative interpretations is an ongoing negotiation of those realities; and all interpretations are valid for the organizational members who hold them.

4. Communication in an organization is constrained by the prior reality and also shapes the existing reality.

Figure 2.1 The Process of Organizational Culture

Opportunity and Threats from External Environments

Stories, rules, norms, rituals, jargon, and jokes from the past (often unconsciously used)

Become the belief system and social practices of the culture; influence employees' communication

Passed from employee to employee through communication

Used in and interpreted as patterns

Employees exit the organization

New or temporary employees enter the organization

Why Culture Cannot Be Studied Without Communication

Before we go any further, let's examine the relationship between communication and culture. How do the processes of communicating and culturing occur relative to one another? There are three ways to examine this relationship (Bisel, Messersmith, & Keyton, 2010; Messersmith, Keyton, & Bisel, 2009). The first relationship, the *object orientation,* positions culture before communication. This orientation also asserts that organizational cultures can be measured and changed to influence discourse. From this view, culture exists and is treated more objectively and independently of communication. Certainly communication is a part of organizational culture, but other elements also influence it. Therefore, changes to culture create changes in communication. And, as a result, individual organizational members are not viewed as influential—because the culture made them behave and communicate the way they did. Their communication is an outcome of the culture.

The second relationship, the *becoming orientation,* is reversed: communication comes before culture. In this view, communicating is the structural force and process that allows organizational culture to develop; and because communication is dynamic, so is organizational culture. In this case, culture cannot be fixed. How individual organizational members communicate matters; they are viewed as having agency in creating the organizational culture, and culture is seen as an outcome of communication.

The third position, *grounded in action orientation,* is not linear. Neither communication nor culture comes first. Rather, communication and culture exist simultaneously. This orientation posits that organizational members' communication is both enabled and constrained by the culture; likewise, organizational culture is reinforced or challenged with every new interaction. Here, the focus is at the level of everyday interaction, which is both enabled and constrained by past interactions.

Each orientation has advantages and disadvantages. Research from all three orientations is presented in this book. As you become more familiar with organizational culture, consider which orientation makes more sense to you. Is it possible to agree with all three orientations? Yes.

Sensemaking

As an organizational member at any hierarchical level, you contribute to the organizing process of the organization and the creation of the

organization's culture by making sense of your work environment, work activities, and the people you work with. For each salient event, you need to make sense of it—structuring what is unknown into the known. Weick's (1995) concept of *sensemaking* explains how individuals make plausible, coherent, and reasonable accounts of what happens in the work environment. Especially important from a communicative perspective, the quality of the interconnections among employees, which are created through interaction, influences the quality of representations or accounts produced (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2009). In other words, how people are distributed in the organization influences the interactions that result from their interdependencies. Who works and communicates with whom doing what job matters. The greater the number or complexity of these interactions, the less likely it is that employees will hold a similar view of an organization's culture.

Oftentimes representations or accounts are told as stories that reveal the meanings made from organizational experiences (Brown, 1990). Although sensemaking is an individual activity, the accounts we create are developed in a social setting. In organizations, that social setting is the organizational culture. In essence, "sensemaking is about organizing through communication" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2009, p. 137).

Although we typically talk about making sense of particular events, sensemaking never really starts—because it never really stops. Sensemaking is ongoing. For example, something happens in the organization. You then draw on all that you know about the situation to make sense of it. Because you are aware of what other organizational members have said and aware of the values the organization promotes, this social activity constrains how you make sense of the event. Of course, the sensemaking of this event occurs in the stream of sensemaking in which you are already engaged. And, what happened in this event and how you make sense of it may, in fact, alter a meaning created earlier. Sensemaking is never complete.

Think about all of the events that happened where you worked last. Although some may stand out as more salient, each event that was prominent enough to capture any of your attention required that you make sense of it. What causes some events to stand out? First, as information load—the quantity, variety, and ambiguity of information you process in the organization—increases, you take steps to punctuate it into manageable chunks. You might forget some of the information, file some, or filter other information out. However you punctuate

the information flow that is part of your organizational experience, some of it will become more salient than others. Second, the greater the complexity—the greater the number of different elements interacting in increasingly interdependent ways—the more it will influence what you notice and what you do not notice. The more complex the information you deal with, the more likely it is that you will create habits or routines for handling it. While those habits or routines may work in many instances, there will be some in which the routine fails—forcing you to take notice. Third, a highly turbulent environment is one in which there is instability or a high frequency of change coupled with randomness—either in frequency or in the direction of change. As turbulence increases, there are more occasions for sensemaking.

When information load, complexity, and turbulence exist—as they do in most organizational environments—ambiguous and uncertain situations are created. Ambiguity exists when there are numerous cues that allow for any number of interpretations. Uncertainty exists when there are not enough cues to create any interpretation. Thus, you engage in sensemaking to create order, particularly when something happens that was not expected or when something that was expected to occur does not.

In some cases, sensemaking occurs in the presence of others who are also trying to make sense of what happened, for example at a meeting. Other times, your sensemaking is influenced because you are aware that you will have to give your explanation of what happened to others who will act upon your explanation. Thus, sensemaking is a social process. It is never solitary. How you make sense internally is contingent on others. That is not to say that your sensemaking will always match the sensemaking of others. Recall that organizational cultures are often better described as a set of subcultures. Individuals in different subcultures may create equivalent, different, or overlapping views. Thus, organizational members can participate in the same event and produce different meanings. How can that be? Sensemaking is not driven by accuracy; it is driven by plausibility. If you believe that the meaning created is likely or acceptable, then it is real for you and you will act on that meaning. Thus, meanings cannot be dictated or controlled. All meanings are possible if they are plausible, coherent, and serve a practical or functional need—that is, through sensemaking you create an account that you believe to be socially acceptable and credible in the work environment.

Murphy's (2001) study of flight attendants demonstrates how organizational members perform sensemaking. As Murphy explains, air travel for flight attendants is a cultural performance; that is, organizational members "participate in a co-construction of meaning that is historically and politically constrained" (p. 37). Although passengers think of air travel as routine, Murphy's descriptions of air travel—its normal routines and its emergencies—make it clear that air travel is anything but routine. For example, water landings are not described as crashing into the ocean, and passengers are encouraged to sit back and relax even while zooming through the air at 30,000 feet. To help passengers manage their performance of routine air travel, flight attendants are required to manage the tensions between reassurance and safety and accommodation and authority. For example, Murphy describes one flight attendant as smiling and assuring passengers even when flying through turbulent weather; and another who must deal with a passenger who mistakenly believes that "landing in Salt Lake" actually meant landing in a lake.

So, how do flight attendants make sense, or plausible, coherent, and reasonable accounts, of ambiguous and uncertain situations? As Murphy explains, flight attendants in their organizational role must make sense of anything that is nonroutine or presented as an emergency. There is no checklist or organization-prescribed procedure to follow. Based upon their organization and occupation specific training and their interactions with other flight attendants (both on this flight and on earlier flights), flight attendants must make sense of whatever event is presented when their ongoing cultural performance is interrupted. They may rely on organizational values and norms learned in training and prescribed in procedures and reintegrate the interruption back into the dominant routine (e.g., smiling and saying everything is okay), or they may rely on other, more informal, sets of values and norms embraced as stereotypes of what flight attendants should say and do. Regardless, to the passenger, the flight attendant is a representative of the organization and, in essence, routinely performs that organization's culture for passengers.

The process of sensemaking is central to the study of organizational culture and is often revealed in the stories organizational members tell about their organizational experiences (Boje, 1995). If you take the perspective that sensemaking is emergent and dynamic, then the meanings that are created can become codified as values, norms, or beliefs that emerge from the stories and interactions of organizational members. Simply, the process of identifying an organization's culture is the process of sensemaking.

Talking About Culture

Although organizational culture emerges from its members' interactions, organizational members generally do not talk directly about what the culture is, how to affirm it, or even how to change it. Indeed, if you asked your friend what the culture was like where she worked you would likely get an "I don't know, you'd just have to work here" type of response. Or perhaps her response would be, "Oh, it's a good [horrible] place to work. The work is easy [difficult] and the people, well, they're okay [annoying]." Despite being involved in its creation, most employees have a difficult time describing their organization's culture in detail. When asked, many employees report a generally positive or negative evaluation of their work environment—-much like you would report, "It's a pretty day" when the sun is shining brightly in a blue sky with fluffy clouds while the temperature is at 80 degrees with low humidity and a light wind from the south-southeast. While these details create the *pretty day* and are available to you if you seek out a weather report, we tend to reduce the specifics into a generalization. This is especially true when organizational members try to describe the organization's culture to outsiders.

Even organizational executives, who some believe are responsible for an organization's culture, speak about their culture in general terms. For example, Blair Contratto, CEO of Little Company of Mary Hospital, has reportedly stated the following:

> We are currently engaged in a refocusing of our culture on service. That includes service to our patients and their families, service to the doctors who choose to admit their patients to one of our 30 facilities, as well as the service and support employees provide to each other. (Kaufman, 2003, p. xx)

From this description, we know that the organization is refocusing its culture on service and to whom that service is directed. But what did the CEO actually reveal about the organization's values and assumptions about service? What is service? What constitutes *good* or *bad* service in this organization?

Revisit the meeting interaction of the Pacifica Radio Foundation's Board of Directors Meeting earlier in this section. Notice that the directors are not talking directly about their organization's culture. The content of their discussion is about the procedures for installing new representatives as members of the board. However, the culture *is* being talked about. Norms are being identified, challenged, and then confirmed. Values about board membership and consensus decision making

are evident in the interaction. Board members are expressing their organizational culture through their interactions. And, through their interactions, board members come to know and understand their organizational culture even without their direct awareness of this happening.

The point here is simple. Although organizational culture emerges from organizational members' communication with one another, it can be difficult to identify and describe a culture. Being in an organizational culture as a customer or other external observer is one way to gain a perspective on it. But being a member of the organization is the best way for knowing what the culture is and understanding it. Despite that intimacy with the culture, it can be difficult for organizational insiders to describe the culture to others or understand the ramifications of organizational culture on their communication performances. One explanation for this is that because an organization's culture is ever changing, it is difficult to isolate its characteristics. In addition, because there may be multiple, and potentially competing, patterns of assumptions and values in any culture, organizational members may or may not be aware of—or be able to articulate—these integrative or competing systems. These difficulties in talking about culture explain why organizations and their members rely on artifacts to communicate about culture.

Organizational Culture as a
Symbolic Communication Process

Communication relies on the use of symbols. We create symbols to name, identify, and distinguish people, things, and situations. Without symbols we could not create meanings or share our experiences with others. For example, the alphabet is a series of symbols that can be combined into words and phrases that also act as symbols. Symbols are powerful physical indicators of organizational life, and they are the foundation from which organizational members draw meanings for and understandings of artifacts, values, and assumptions. Symbols "are not simply by-products of organization; rather, symbols are elements that structure members' active construction of sense, knowledge, and behavior . . . that stand for the ideas that compose the organization" (Rafaeli & Worline, 2000, pp. 72–73). Symbols, in their various forms, can carry an incredible amount of information about an organization and, as a result, can be meaningful shorthand devices for both internal and external constituencies.

Organizational symbols are abundant. Symbols can be found in almost any form of artifact deemed meaningful by organizational

members. Even sounds or a series of behaviors can be used in this way. The first example explains how symbols create cultural value internally to the organization; the second example examines an organizational symbol from a more public viewpoint.

This first example demonstrates how cultural artifacts can reveal deep structures even from what seem like innocuous artifacts of work life. In two U.S. government offices tasked with acquiring resources for the military, employees placed images of the products they had produced or acquired on shirts, license plates, screen savers, and all correspondence used by the office. "The people who worked in this organization were very proud of the work they did in supporting the armed forces of the Unites States. They were very patriotic in their attitudes and this carried into taking great pride in their work and contribution" (Baughn & Finzel, 2009, p. 14). Representing their work purposely and publicly through these artifacts reveals a deep level of commitment and patriotism. Thus, organizational symbols can have powerful and deep expressions of the values and assumptions that organizational members create, maintain, and share through communication.

In this second example, Walmart has changed its most public symbol, its logo, five times. The latest version officially drops the hyphen (i.e., Wal-mart) and adds a gold starburst (or sun, flower, or spark) at the end. The slogan "Save money. Live better" runs horizontally under the company's name. Why did Walmart make this change in its well known worldwide symbol? The change was made primarily to help customers focus on the transformation that had been taking place in their business. New Walmart stores are designed to be more environmentally friendly and use less energy. Walmart also claims that the revised logo reflects its "renewed sense of purpose to help people save money so they can live better" (http://walmartstores.com/pressroom/news/8411.aspx).

Across the great variety of things that can be construed as meaningful symbols, there are four functions of symbols in organizational culture (Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). The first function of symbols is to reflect organizational culture, as they represent and reveal what is tacitly known but difficult for an organizational member to communicate. Symbols, as tangible and sensory objects, integrate feelings, thoughts, and actions into a shared meaning. Recall the description of the University of Kansas Jayhawk in Section 1. In this case, the symbol identified as the Jayhawk is an artifact of the university's culture. Its bright, vibrant blue, red, and yellow colors configured into the unmistakable shape of the Jayhawk mascot cannot be missed. The Jayhawk is emblazoned across center court in the field house—ensuring that anyone watching a home game knows that KU is playing. The KU

Jayhawk is so prominent on campus that someone wearing a jacket or sweatshirt from any other school clearly stands out.

The second function of symbols is to influence behavior by triggering internalized values and norms. Organizations can use artifacts to help guide people's appropriate selection of behavior. For example, suppose you work as a quality inspector on the shop floor. The bright fluorescent lights make it seem like daytime regardless of which shift you work. As you and your co-workers walk out of the changing facility and onto the shop floor, the volume and pace of conversations pick up to rise above the continuous drone of machinery. You see a red light atop your computer monitor indicating that an instant message is waiting for you. You read the IM and find that the control engineers want you to attend their meeting and provide feedback on a design issue. You exit the shop floor by taking the elevator to the floor above. When you step out of the elevator, you pause to adjust to your surroundings—deep-pile carpet beneath your feet, dark wood paneling, dim spot lighting, and background music create a distinctively different aesthetic from your normal work environment. You move more slowly, and when you walk into the conference room, you adjust your speaking volume to a more normal conversational tone. In the plush office, the norms include talking quietly and respectfully and listening carefully to others (and demonstrating this nonverbally). The physical symbols and the norms of communicating in this environment trigger an internalized value that intellectual work is important and that employees should have the opportunity to carefully deliberate and reflect before making decisions. Contrast this to the shop floor in which noisy machines make even simple interactions difficult. The pace is also faster, as employees unconsciously match their activity level to that of the machines. The symbols in this physical environment trigger internalized values that physical work should be completed quickly, efficiently, and with a minimum of interaction among employees. By alternating between the two environments, it is clear to see how the different artifacts of the physical environment carry different meanings and influence your behavior.

The third function of symbols is to facilitate organizational members' communication about their organizational experiences. Organizations rely on logos to identify information from or about those organizations. The same logo appears on the letterhead, report covers, the internal phone book, the company newsletter, the information directory on each floor, and the windbreaker you were given for being an employee of the company for five years. Communication that is marked by this artifact sends the signal that this communication is *official* and *real*. Here, symbol use is meant to create an organizational identity and to help you identify with that identity.

In other words, logos can only be meaningful symbols when organizational members use them in symbolic ways. The consistent use of a logo frames what is and is not connected with an organization, and it implicitly provides instruction on how to treat information from those sources. Artifacts, like logos, provide a tangible representation of values and beliefs that can be abstract or ambiguous but critical or central to the organization.

The fourth function of a symbol is to integrate organizational systems of meaning. In most organizations, an ambiguously stated value can foster the notion that everyone has the same view, when many different interpretations are actually present. Such strategic use of ambiguity promotes a unified diversity that creates the perception of commonality despite multiple views. In this case, organizational symbols function "at a level of abstraction at which agreement *can* occur" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). The KU Jayhawk is a good example. This symbol can carry several different, equally valid, interpretations—basketball excellence and democratic values—that contribute simultaneously to unique, yet socially meaningful, interpretations of the University of Kansas culture.

Despite their powerful presence, exercise caution when interpreting an organization's culture through symbols. First, artifacts can be superficial (Hofstede, 2001). They can easily be replaced with new ones (Walmart has had six logos since its 1962 incorporation). Symbols can also be copied by and from other cultural groups. The slogan, *Can you hear me now?*, often associated with Verizon Wireless, has been copied in similar forms by other organizations, recited as punch lines in jokes, and parodied. Second, because symbols can be easily identified and meanings easily inferred, it is easy to presume that the interpretation you infer is the interpretation others would give. Symbols can be individually and differently interpreted; thus, it is crucial to discover how organizational members view them.

❖ THE STRUCTURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

A Consensus View of Organizational Culture

A consensus view of organizational culture is based on the congruence of artifacts, values, and assumptions jointly held or shared by organizational members. The more unity there is among members, the more consensual the view of organizational culture. From an integration perspective, mutually consistent interpretations are abundant (Martin, 2002) and so deeply held that little variation occurs (Schein, 2004).

Generally, a charismatic or otherwise strong leader shapes this integration by initially generating the value and beliefs and then uses strategies to publicize and propagate them.

Sometimes this phenomenon is referred to as a powerful culture or strong culture. Research suggests that some organizations do have powerful cultures—and, generally, this is the mostly widely held popular view of organizational culture. The U.S. Marine Corps is a good example of culture viewed from an integrative perspective. While many organizations have multiple cultures, they often promote themselves as having consensual cultures. This is easily seen by exploring organizational mission statements. The use of "we" or "our" suggests that every member of the organization agrees to the values described. While that may be true for these organizations, it is also possible that when an organization appears to have a strong, unified, and shared culture what is shared may be superficial and not deeply held by all organizational members. Or, the direction of the mutually consistent interpretations may be more negative than positive.

Studies arguing that a strong culture exists in an organization are often narrowly focused on one organizational issue to the exclusion of other issues. Organizational members may share values and assumptions about a particular cultural element. But that is not necessarily an indication that organizational members share values and assumptions about all cultural elements. Even when a congruent view of an organization's culture is held, the influence of this characteristic may not be as strong or powerful as assumed (Isaac & Pitt, 2001). And, of course, promotion of a strong consensual culture by leaders and executives does not guarantee that such a culture exists.

Managers often prefer a culture in which values are shared, believing that widely held values will lead to organizational harmony, and, thus, organizational effectiveness will be enhanced. The benefits of a consensual culture are thought to include job satisfaction, commitment, and lengthy employee tenure—elements that should improve organizational functioning. Employees also can benefit from a consensual culture. When values are homogeneous it is easier for organizational members to make assumptions that will be similar to the assumptions made by others (Stackman, Pinder, & Connor, 2000).

Kunda's (1992) ethnography of a tech firm discovered three ways in which its managers controlled the organization to produce a strong culture. First, managers developed, articulated, and disseminated the organization's ideology. Using relentless repetition and a variety of techniques to disseminate consistent information, managers promoted a collective view of its goals and history to encourage employees to

become family members in an organization with a moral purpose. Doing so emphasized the social attributes of the company and specified employee roles. These consistent and unambiguous messages persuaded employees to internalize the beliefs and emotions prescribed by management and to follow their behavioral prescriptions. Second, the ideological principles embraced by management were designed to minimize the use of traditional bureaucratic controls, such as hierarchical and functional differentiation, and pay-motivated control structures. Rather, managers designed the organizational structure so that it was an informal, flexible, relationship-based network, allowing employees to be involved in formal and informal work practices. This structural design maximized employees' sense of ownership and security and, in turn, heightened their commitment to the organization. Third, rituals were a central part of daily work life. Slogans such as "We are like a football team" reinforced the notions that employees should work hard and have fun. These themes were repeated in rituals—presentations by top management, orientation sessions called *boot camps*, career seminars, work group meetings, *timeouts* or parties, and organization Olympics. Whether large or small scale, rituals confirmed and promoted the roles that employees were to fulfill. The rituals encouraged all employees to become control agents prescribing how employees should complete their work. Through these mechanisms, management was able to create a pervasive and comprehensive, or strong, culture that also demanded a great deal from employees.

However, organizational members' consensual view of their organization's culture can have detrimental effects. When organizational members work in a culture that values consistency, consensus, and clarity, there can be less value placed on innovation, creativity, and questioning—characteristics that have been demonstrated as important to success in complex and turbulent business conditions (Sorensen, 2002). A more unified culture facilitates routine and thereby reliable performance in stable environments. The "established way of understanding the world" (p. 88) continues to work because the business environment is perceived as unchanging. However, in a volatile or rapidly changing business environment, a unified culture is less likely to allow organizational members to explore and discover, making it difficult for individuals and the organization to adapt.

Moreover, a strong culture can be situated on the wrong values— ways that are not appropriate or not conducive to growth (Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000). There can also be a dampening effect on individual rights and freedoms that is particularly alarming when management

purposely manipulates employee value and belief structures (Stackman, Pinder, & Connor, 2000). Worker autonomy can be threatened, causing employees to have conflicting ideals of loyalty and allegiance. Do they honor the company or themselves? When employees choose to submit to the premise of an organization's culture, the authenticity of that position can be questioned (Kunda, 1992).

In a study of emotional labor at a nursing home, Sass (2000) points out that viewing culture from an integration or consensual perspective can obscure issues. His investigation revealed that spirituality was a unifying value of the organization. It was expressed in three ways: (a) alignment between the mission statement representing management and the personal values of staff members, (b) as a context that fostered expression of personal spirituality, and (c) in organizational practices based on relationships rather than bureaucracy. Despite the centrality of spirituality as a core cultural value in the nursing home work environment, not all employees regarded it positively. This raises the question of how much consensus is required and in what ways consensus must be displayed or practiced to be salient for organizational members.

Creating a consensual view of organizational culture may be perceived as being ideal, but it is also likely to be difficult to achieve. Six factors limit the degree to which a consensual view of culture can be achieved (Isaac & Pitt, 2001). First, employees are often members of occupational or professional communities and bring preexisting shared values and practices into the workplace. Second, employees belong to specific functions (e.g., manufacturing, human resources, engineering, or sales) or work groups in the organization. Within each of these, employees are likely to develop shared values and beliefs that differ from employees in other functions and in other work groups. Third, organizational members are also structured by the organization's hierarchy. Managers are likely to develop shared values and normative practices that differ from employees who do not have supervisory responsibilities. Hierarchical groups of employees differ in the amount and type of responsibility and authority they have, resulting in different core assumptions about work and their workplace. Fourth, other subcultures can develop. For example, working mothers, employees who are continuing their education, or employees who work the third shift are likely to create values and beliefs that support a subculture. The interpersonal relationships that develop among groups of people who share similarities encourage subcultures to develop that are distinct and enduring. Fifth, whatever groups exist in an organization are likely to distinguish themselves from members of

other groups. This in-group/out-group distinction often results in intergroup conflict that strengthens the differentiation between groups and the subculture of each group. Sixth, all employees have individual value systems, and core values are often difficult to change.

Thus, while a strong, unified, and shared culture is often the goal of management and perceived to be the ideal organizational culture, creating such a culture is very difficult and may be detrimental to the organization. While some cultural elements may be shared, it is likely that others are not.

❖ A DIVIDED VIEW OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The alternative view is that different groups, or subcultures, are created as organizational members interact in their daily work routines. To the extent that different sets of artifacts, values, and assumptions develop in those groups, an organization's culture is said to have subcultures. In essence, the way in which the subcultures coexist creates the culture (Schein, 2004). Subcultures can develop in several ways and can have various relationships to one another. Subgroup distinctions often occur along functional or occupational roles; geographical locations; product, market, or technology distinctions; and hierarchical levels. In some cases, subcultures develop simply because leadership is enacted differently. In addition, subcultures can develop and be sustained when two or more organizations merge or work together in a joint venture or strategic alliance. In ways less connected to organizational structure or functioning, subcultures can also develop along age, gender, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, physical ability, and family status distinctions among employees. Employees who seek out others with similar characteristics and interests can create informal subgroups to address mutual work-life issues. Friendships among employees can also develop and create a subculture.

Most commonly, subgroups develop along functional lines. It is not uncommon for a subculture to develop when an organization employs many individuals in the same profession or occupation—especially when these individuals are working together or performing a function central to the goals of the organization. Professors in a university, social workers in a social-service organization, and customer service representatives at a call center are good examples of organizational situations in which groups of individuals with similar jobs are likely to create a subculture. Because the work of these groups is central to the organizational mission, these individuals are likely to bond

together as they work to control their collective destiny in the organization (Bloor & Dawson, 1994).

For example, the merger of a home health care services company and a medical supply company highlighted the differences between two functional groups (Rosenfeld, Richman, & May, 2004). The social workers and nurses who provided health care services to patients in their homes viewed the merged organization very differently from the clerical and administrative personnel who ran the health care supply business from the central office. The office workers wanted more information from the company about its policies and objectives, yet the social workers and nurses viewed the organization's culture as placing greater emphasis on planning, efficiency, and other task-oriented elements. Members of the two groups reported different information needs and viewed the type of information and the way it was disseminated in distinct ways. It was not the case that the groups needed more information but that each group had unique information needs from the organization relative to its specific job functions.

Geography is another common identifier of subgroups in organizations. Many organizations even organize themselves this way and use geographical identifiers. For example, Allstate Insurance is divided into regional offices: Northeast, New York, New Jersey, Capital Area, Southeast, Florida, North Central, Southern, Midwest, West Central, Texas, Southwest, Northwest, and California. In each of these regions, Allstate offers insurance and financial products; practically, insurance laws vary across the country. Employees in each region of the company are likely to develop a unique subculture, as employees within each region are likely to be more interdependent with others from the same region. Then, of course, subcultures along functional and occupational distinctions are likely to develop within each region.

Hierarchy can also create subcultures. Organizational members at the same level will share similar organizational treatment, thus subcultures develop. Some organizations make broad hierarchical distinctions, such as salaried and hourly, professional and staff, or managers and associates. Other organizations carefully create similar levels of hierarchy within each organizational function by creating a group of vice presidents, a bigger group of assistant vice presidents, and a still larger group of managers. Each group has specific roles, responsibilities, and rights and, as a result, will have more in common with one another than individuals above or below them in the hierarchy. Some organizations even hold executive retreats and staff meetings—further enhancing hierarchical distinctions. And, in some organizations, different sets of employee benefits make hierarchical distinctions even more salient.

Another way of thinking about subcultures focuses on the language use of organizational members as they segment themselves into *us* and *them* (Parker, 2000). Across organizations, three *us* and *them* claims persist: spatial or functional, generational, and occupational or professional. A spatial or functional segmentation of culture occurs based on location of work units, which often represents functional distinctions as well. Clerks who process paperwork work in the office; technicians who manufacture chemicals work in the plant. The two physical spaces support two different organizational functions and, as a result, create different communication environments resulting in different language communities.

A generational segmentation of organizational culture is based on who is old and new or who is perceived as old and new to the organization. At a cardboard box manufacturing facility, technicians with 20 or more years of seniority divided themselves from recently graduated engineers with only months of tenure with the company. Implicit in the technicians' complaints about the engineers was the following sentiment: "They couldn't possibly understand how these machines work. I've worked on this machine, or one like it, for over 20 years. I know how it runs. I know what it needs. Some wet-behind-the-ears kid can't tell me how to make a better box." Alternately, the new engineers explained, "We've got new techniques . . . and they [the technicians] fight us every step in making any change." The generational segmentation underscores the way in which organizational history shapes the present. The occupational or professional segmentation, like that between doctors and nurses in a hospital, is based on expertise or specialized knowledge sets. One claims to know something that the other group does not (or cannot or should not) know. Although this type of segmentation is most often noticed at the professional level, occupational divides can exist at all levels of the organization. At a retail store, a clerk ringing up my order proclaimed, "I'm not in customer service. That's his [pointing to the clerk standing next to him] job."

For each organizational member, identifying the *us* and *them* segments of an organization's culture signals who understands the culture like he or she does and who does not. Each segmentation underscores what is going on, whose job it is, and whose it is not from a unique perspective. Organizational members use language to segment and identify themselves in these ways. Interestingly, the three subcultural forms—spatial or functional, generational, and occupational or professional—can be used singly or in a combination of ways. Moreover, using a spatial identification and distinction in one setting does not preclude

the same employee from invoking a generational identification and distinction in another. From Parker's (2000) perspective, a culture is composed of a variety of contested *us* and *them* claims.

Many subculture divisions are explicit; others are less so. Hospital employees, for example, evaluated subcultures by the behavior of leaders (Egan, 2008). Leadership subcultures were evaluated as being bureaucratic, supportive, or innovative. Employees in the supportive and innovative subcultures were more willing to emphasize learning new skills and applying them in their day-to-day work. Alternately, employees in bureaucratic subcultures were less willing to do so. Indeed, employees' evaluation of their unit subculture was more influential in their willingness to learn and apply new skills than their evaluation of the organizational culture as a whole.

Forms of Cultural Division

In contrast to the clear consensus of an integrated view of organizational culture, there are two configurations for examining the relationship of subcultures to one another in the divided view.

Differentiation

In the first configuration, organizational members may differentiate into subgroups relative to their inconsistent interpretations (Martin, 2002). Typical differentiated patterns are often along the lines of salaried managers and hourly employees, home office employees and field office employees, or any of the dimensions along which organizational members identify and organize themselves into language communities. This type of segmentation reveals oppositional thinking (i.e., *us* versus *them*), with each subculture concerned about the power it holds relative to the other subculture.

In most cases, these distinctions will result in multiple subcultures. For example, Helms and Stern (2001) found evidence of multiple subculture patterns. Organizational values were different among organizational units, by hierarchical level and by age group, ethnicity, and gender. Within each subculture, there is consistency and clarity that makes each subculture distinct from others. Yet, organizational members are likely to belong to more than one subculture. When multiple subcultures exist simultaneously, they are not neatly divided nor neatly aligned. To which subculture does a 30-year-old female African American manager in purchasing belong: the subculture distinction based on function, hierarchy, age, ethnicity, or gender? She belongs to each of these and all of these at the same time, and the artifacts, values,

and assumptions central to each subculture may conflict with the artifacts, values, and assumptions of other subcultures.

Subculture distinctions can also be based on the inconsistencies between espoused values and enacted values. An espoused value is one presented to others as a core value or promoted as central to the organization's mission or treatment of employees. Yet, there is often a gap between what an organization espouses and what an organization does. Organizational members indicate that something is highly valued, but their actions or communication indicate otherwise. For example, an organization says it values diversity and implements marketing campaigns targeted to specific groups of minority customers. Despite preaching this concept in team meetings and in the organization's advertising, employees are beginning to wonder when the organization's value of diversity will filter into the leadership ranks. Despite the push for *customer* diversity, employees are well aware that all mid- and top-level managers in their retail organization are White males. Here the differentiated subcultures are based on the difference between an organizational idea and organizational reality.

A careful analysis of most any organizational culture will expose espoused values that are not enacted. A study of work-family policies (Kirby & Krone, 2002) demonstrates the incongruence between the values espoused and enacted in a regulatory agency's culture. According to organizational policy, employees could take annual leave for personal use, sick leave, family and medical leave, and leave without pay. Employees also had two options for flexible scheduling. All of the policies were available on the agency's website and in a written employee benefits summary. Thus, formally, all employees had equal access to any of the policies that fit their specific circumstances.

However, the way in which employees took advantage of the policies and the way in which their work was supervised led to discrepancies and contradictions. For example, one employee explained that while the agency touted the policies as benefits, she complained that because she was single she could not take advantage of the policies, which in effect gave employees with family members more time off from work than she enjoyed. Of those employees who did benefit from the work-family policies, some were reluctant to take advantage of them, as their colleagues complained about completing their unfinished work. At the macro level from the organization's perspective, the work-family policies were a benefit to help employees balance their work and family lives. Yet, at the micro-level of the organization, conversations among employees influenced the way in which employees

used the policies, or felt about, or acted toward those who did. Thus, the espoused value of work and family balance was never realized.

Subcultures have various types of relationships to the primary organizational culture (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Parker, 2000). These can be characterized in five ways. A subculture might enhance the primary organizational culture by supporting the core values and norms of the organization. Alternately, a subculture could dissent from the core values and norms by developing alternative methods to achieve organizational goals. Third, a subculture could be seen as a counterculture, which rejects the organization's core goals, causing it to conflict with the primary culture system. Fourth, a subculture could be orthogonal in that it supports norms and values in addition to, or independent of, those in the core organizational culture. Fifth, a subculture could be deferential by yielding to or not resisting a more dominant subculture. Of course, if the organization employs members of numerous professional and occupational groups, many subcultures could exist and have different types of relationships to the primary organizational culture. In all cases, however, there is recognition of an overall organizational culture that acts as a background against which the subculture or subcultures are viewed.

The cultural differences and inconsistencies revealed from a differentiation perspective are viewed as being inescapable and often desirable (Martin, 2002). Moreover, the inconsistencies between or among subcultures are usually clear. Recognize, however, that all subculture differences are not necessarily conflicting. Subcultures can exist together in harmony, conflict, or indifference. Soldiers in the U.S. Army demonstrate a differentiated culture (Howard, 2006). First, the U.S. Army has core values (e.g., discipline, obedience, and courage) that support the value of the team over individual sacrifice. In other words, the mission comes before individual needs of a solider. These core values are subscribed to by soldiers who are members of the active duty forces (also known as the *regular army*) and those who are members of the Army Reserve or National Guard (also known as the *reserve component*)—this creates a common culture. Despite these common values, the reserve forces is a subculture of the regular U.S. Army. Members of reserve units are more likely to be split apart in the field while regular army units are more likely to be assigned a mission that preserves their team structure and training. In the Howard study, reserve and active duty soldiers were also treated differently with respect to emergency leave. Active duty soldiers who requested and were granted leave for family emergencies often did not return to the field. Alternatively, far fewer emergency leave requests of reserve duty soldiers were granted.

Indeed, many reserve soldiers talked about filing grievances— something they could do in their civilian jobs. In this case, commanding officers reinforced different norms and values that clearly distinguished reserve from regular duty soldiers. Intended or not, the commanders' action had the effect of reinforcing the reserve members' perceptions of unfair treatment based on their status. While members of both the regular and reserve forces were still committed to core Army values related to the mission, members of the reserve forces felt subordinate to the culture of the regular Army.

Fragmentation

The second divided perspective for viewing organizational culture is fragmentation (Martin, 2002). In this case, ambiguity reigns; there is neither clear consistency nor clear inconsistency. While the clear opposites or dichotomies provide some clarity from a differentiation view of culture, a fragmentation perspective will reveal that the organization is not so neatly divided. From this perspective, organizational members are part of shifting coalitions, forming and reforming based on shared identities, issues, and circumstances. Subcultures appear briefly but with boundaries that are permeable and fluctuating, making it difficult for a subculture to sustain itself for any length of time. In this case, tensions are irreconcilable and are often described as ironies, paradoxes, or contradictions, as employees may belong to subcultures that are in agreement on some issues and simultaneously belong to other subcultures that are not. From this perspective, organizational members have multiple, overlapping identities, making it difficult to create organization-wide consensus.

The fragmentation perspective acknowledges that organizational ambiguities exist. Although ambiguity is traditionally viewed as problematic, it is seen as a normal organizing condition within the fragmentation perspective. Thus, *no clear way* is often the hallmark of the multiple realities revealed through fragmentation analysis. So many interpretations and views exist that consensus cannot be achieved throughout the organization or within subgroups.

Despite an organization's best attempts to create a cohesive or unitary view of organizational values and policies, employees can fail to uphold or respect values and policies for a variety of reasons—in turn, creating a culture of ambiguity. For example, in response to several sexual harassment charges, including some that were high profile, a municipality sought to win the trust of employees on this issue by promoting a zero-tolerance sexual-harassment policy (see Keyton,

Ferguson, & Rhodes, 2001). The zero-tolerance policy was promoted in the organization's newsletter and was the topic of specialized training—actions taken by management to demonstrate to employees this *new way of doing business*. Because the issue was sexual harassment, management expected that men and women would see the issue differently, but no one expected the various ways in which employees actually responded to it. Ambiguity about the policy and its effect on the organization's culture was created as men, not women, perceived higher levels of sexual conduct in the organization. At the same time, targets of sexual harassment in the organization, which were more likely to be women, perceived higher levels of sexual conduct. Further complicating the perceived influence of the policy, employees who scored higher on the post-training evaluation did not support the organization's zero-tolerance policy to a greater extent than employees whose scores were lower. Thus, employees' beliefs about sexual conduct in the organization and the influence of the zero tolerance policy were not neatly divided along the lines of men and women. Rather, employees' responses indicated that many perceptions about sexual conduct and the new policy existed simultaneously—creating ambiguity rather than managing it.

❖ CULTURAL CONSENSUS AND DIVISION

Martin (2002) argues, and many others offer evidence, that viewing an organization from a viewpoint of consensus or division is limiting. By focusing on one or the other, we may miss the way in which organizational members construct and enact their culture through communication. All three perspectives—integration, differentiation, and fragmentation—must be allowed for, as it is likely that in any organizational culture

> some aspects of the culture will be shared by most members, producing consistent, clear interpretations . . . other aspects of the culture will be interpreted differently by different groups, creating subcultures that overlap and nest with each other in relationships of harmony, interdependence, and/or conflict . . . some aspects of the culture will be interpreted ambiguously, with irony, paradox, and irreconcilable tensions. (Martin, 2002, p. 120)

Using all three perspectives allows consensus, consistency, and ambiguity to be revealed as they actually exist in an organization's culture, and it avoids the potential blind spots of each perspective

when used alone. That is, an integration perspective would not reveal ambiguity, while the differentiation and fragmentation perspectives would not reveal what aspects of organizational culture members share (Martin, 2002).

Together, the three perspectives encourage three distinct revelations about organizational culture. It is not that one perspective is more correct than another. Rather, each perspective offers an incomplete view of an organization's culture. All three perspectives are needed to offer a multifocal view of organizational culture. For example, organizations require some shared cultural elements to survive. Yet, why would we expect any organization to share interpretations of all aspects of its culture? Knowing how organizational members interpret things differently *and* similarly will reveal the most complete view of organizational culture (Martin, 2002). Two examples demonstrate the way in which the three perspectives reveal a multiperspective view of organizational culture.

First, in a study of employees in a federal agency, Hylmö and Buzzanell's (2002) use of integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives revealed a paradox. Through the integration lens, the agency was portrayed as coherent, innovative, and employee centered. The differentiation lens revealed four subgroups arranged on two dimensions: promotable and nonpromotable and whether work was completed through telecommuting or on site. The fragmentation lens revealed ambiguity resulting from a recent reorganization attempt and a surge in agency growth.

> Standards and expectations were no longer clearly stated or understood. Rules and operating procedures appear unclear and ambiguous while, at the same time, they were constructed as resolvable and decipherable, if only employees could uncover enough clues. In other words, the way things were supposed to happen and the ways they seemed to occur were rendered mysterious in members' discourses. (pp. 342–343)

Using all three perspectives helped explain why employees could describe their culture as mysterious and confusing while experiencing joy and opportunity.

The second example is drawn from an examination of a 25-member committee charged with identifying candidates and selecting one as their university's provost (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Andrews, 1998). Over one year, the committee, representing a variety of university groups, met to develop the job announcement, review applications, check

references, select a short list of applicants for further evaluation, conduct interviews and campus visits, and make a final recommendation. Early on in the committee's activities, the research team was "struck by the differences in perspectives, the large discrepancies in perceptions of the search process." While committee members agreed on what events and activities committee members participated in, members brought different frameworks for understanding and interacting in the search process. "No single narrative captured 'what actually happened' during the search; instead, multiple stories were invented and gained favor in line with individual biases and beliefs" (p. 7).

Eisenberg, Murphy, and Andrews (1998) found that all three perspectives—integration, differentiation, and fragmentation—were revealed by committee members in their descriptions and explanations of the work of the committee. Committee members were not neatly divided into different perspectives with some using only an integration lens while others used only a differentiation or fragmentation lens to explain the committee's actions. Rather, committee members presented a far more complex view of the committee's work, as some used more than one perspective to explain what the committee was doing. The integration perspective revealed that committee members were ordered and disciplined in their meeting activities and presented their decisions to others as shared by all committee members. However, the differentiation perspective revealed that controversy about a candidate that was not addressed in the public meetings was a topic of concern for some committee members later. The fragmentation perspective revealed that committee members had so many different views about the criteria for evaluating candidates that ambiguity over this central issue influenced their discussions and decisions.

In this case, the committee members treated their narrative interpretations from the three perspectives as rhetorical choices; that is, committee members chose the perspective that suited a particular audience and communication situation. While the narrative explanations were used independently as strategic devices, communication among the committee members created a nexus, or a connection or link, across the three perspectives allowing a variety of cultural influences to come together within permeable and arbitrary boundaries (Martin, 2002). Together, the narratives from the three perspectives created a richer explanation of how committee members interpreted the search process.

A nexus approach to the study of organizational culture acknowledges internal and external influences; such an approach also

distinguishes what is unique in an organizational culture from what is not. As Martin (2002) explains, some external influences—such as the influences from an industry, profession, national culture, or racial or socioeconomic group—are not unique to any organization. Similar organizations have the potential to be similarly influenced by the same external forces. These external forces, however, do interact with influences internal to an organization to create a unique mix. This mix of influences is not contained in an organizational structure that is rigid and fixed. Rather, this mix of internal and external influences is part of an organizational structure composed of moveable, fluctuating, permeable, and blurred subcultural boundaries. Thus, it is more accurate to think of any organizational culture as being many cultures that are blurred, overlapped, and nested to create an organizational multiculture.

As Alvesson (2002) argues, "organizational cultures are then best understood not as unitary wholes or as stable sets of subcultures but as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds" (pp. 190–191). Even in what appear at first glance to be homogeneous and stable organizations, cultural configurations—influenced by both internal and external conditions—are likely to be multiple, complex, and shifting.

Martin (2002) argues that the way in which subcultures relate to one another *is* the organization's culture. Martin uses the metaphor of the organizational culture terrain. Two subcultures are differentiated; their views are inconsistent with one another and possibly conflict. Or, from a fragmentation perspective, the organizational culture is in such flux that ambiguity is normal. In this case, subcultures cannot be clearly distinguished because consensus does not develop within any collective. While it is tempting (and easier) to select one of these three perspectives to reflect organizational culture, Martin advocates that we view an organization's culture from all three. Each subculture perspective provides a different lens or perspective for interpreting an organization's culture. Using all three provides a more robust interpretation of the relationships among cultural manifestations, the organization's orientation to consensus, and its treatment of ambiguity.

> Each perspective has conceptual blind spots that the combination of the three does not. For example, the integration view is blind to ambiguities, and the fragmentation and differentiation views are blind to that which most cultural members share. In this sense, the three perspectives combine well with each other, offering a conceptual sweep that no one of these perspectives can encompass. (pp. 120–121)

One way to grasp Martin's perspective is to think of a kaleidoscope—a tube-shaped optical instrument that when put to your eye can be rotated to produce an infinite succession of brightly colored symmetrical designs. Just as the kaleidoscope creates a unique image based on the interplay of light, reflection, and color, each of Martin's perspectives illuminates unique aspects of an organization's culture. For the most complete view of a culture, each perspective must be applied and then interpreted relative to the others.

For Parker (2000), however, using the term *subculture* even from Martin's perspective does not allow us to recognize the nested, embedded, or overlapping character of organizational culture. He asks, "Can a sub-subculture exist?" Rather than focusing on subcultures, he would have us identify the way in which organizational members use language to identify the multicultures that exist. Parker argues that focusing on the identification of subcultures implies a search for unity where unity might not exist. Thus, the more recent conceptualization of subcultures relative to organizational culture is a multiperspective view that allows for all structural possibilities to exist. Looking for the ways in which organizational members organize their language is likely to be the best representation of the symbolic practices of an organization. Some level of sharedness must exist for organizational members to coordinate their actions toward the organization's superordinate goal. But within that unity, multiple lines of fracture will exist, and employees may not agree on the pattern of fractures (Parker, 2000).

There is empirical evidence to support this view. Riad's (2007) analyses of organizational members' talk during an organizational merger reveal the fluidity of organizational culture. Sometimes organizational members talked as if their culture was both unique and united, as those who survived the merger spoke about fundamental differences, as well as embracing cohesion. Interestingly, cohesion and cultural integration between the two merging companies was especially heightened when organizational members spoke with the transition team. Employees spoke convincingly about cohesion enabling them to "fight off threats and find points of collaboration even in times of disagreement" (p. 38). In this case, cohesion was symbolically constructed through their conversations to help preserve identity and displace uncertainty. Thus, the merger revealed the temporary and changing positions that organizational members held. Still, identifying the subcultures of an organization is a convenient method for making distinctions about different groups of

organizational members. From Parker's perspective, however, you should allow for the possibility of one person belonging to many subcultures simultaneously. Not only should you look for ways in which organizational members organize themselves to understand an organization's culture, you should also consider the relationship between the values that organizational members say they favor and the values that they act out.

❖ WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IS NOT

Arguably, organizational culture can be a difficult concept to define and study. Organizational culture was previously defined as the set(s) of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerges from the interactions of organizational members. Using that definition as a basis, we can explore what organizational culture is not.

Organizational culture is not any one value, belief, or assumption. It is the combination or configuration of the multiple artifacts, values, and assumptions that creates an organization's culture. It is neither a simple or single phenomenon (Morgan, 1997).

Organizational culture is not what someone says it is. All members of the organization socially construct its culture. Culture is often believed to be management driven; yet employees also influence it by accepting, rejecting, resisting, or subverting management efforts. Culture can be facilitated, but it cannot be dictated.

Organizational culture is not just the habits and practices of an organization. Although habits and practices are typically observed, they are the manifest activity of underlying or latent norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that are often taken for granted by organizational members.

Organizational culture is not the social structure of the organization. Although organizations are composed of social structures of organizational members, the two are not the same. Social structures are the tangible and specific ways in which organizational members create relationships through their interactions with one another. Organizational culture is the patterns of artifacts, values, and assumptions that are created in those interactions. However, an organization's social structure does not necessarily mirror the organization's system of assumptions, values, and beliefs (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Organizational culture is not an organization's trademark symbol or phrase. Any one thing—a symbol, a saying—may be a physical or

outward representation of an organization's culture, but it is not the culture. Organizational members interacting with one another create meanings for symbols and sayings. Organizational culture emerges from these meanings.

Organizational culture is not a professional culture. The specialized training of professionals—such as nurses, journalists, and engineers—creates a professional or occupational culture. Professionals learn the culture of their occupation as they are educated, and they later enact cultural beliefs and values as they perform the practices and ceremonies of their occupation (Bloor & Dawson, 1994). Professional culture is also endorsed and encouraged by the professional associations (e.g., American Association of Neuroscience Nurses, Society of Professional Journalists, American Institute of Chemical Engineers) that certify, endorse, or provide further professional training. Professional culture establishes the norms, standards, and operating practices of a profession, which in turn shapes how individuals enact their profession.

Although professional cultures dictate many norms and operating procedures, individual professionals vary in their adherence to these in completing their work. It is a rare organization that employs only one type of professional. More commonly, many types of professionals are employees of an organization, and those many professionals are just part of the organization's total employee base. As a result of these two factors, a professional culture seldom becomes an organization's culture. However, if the number of one type of professional is large or if powerful organizational members belong to one profession, a professional culture may form and exist simultaneously with the organization's culture.

Organizational culture is not equivalent to industry characteristics. Organizations in the same industry are likely to use similar resources for accomplishing their work. As a result, tasks across organizations in an industry are likely to be similar. While technology is considered one of the most salient similarities across organizations in the same industry, industrywide standards and government regulations are also likely to impact organizations in a similar way (Chatman & Jehn, 1994). Despite these similarities, culture can vary across organizations in the same industry. Why? Organizations compete for workers. Once hired, each employee contributes differently to the organization's culture.

Organizational culture is not static. Rather, organizational culture is dynamic because it emerges from the interactions of organizational members and the meanings they create from these interactions.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OR ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE?

In the communication literature, organizational culture and organizational climate are typically different constructs. In the management literature, these two are often seen with a high degree of similarity; the popular and business press often use the two terms synonymously. As a result of this conceptual confusion (or integration), it is important for you to be able to distinguish which construct is being addressed.

Scholars (Alvesson & Berg, 1991; Denison, 1996; Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Glisson & James, 2002; Hofstede, 2001; Isaac & Pitt, 2001; Trice & Beyer, 1993) argue that over time culture and climate have become recognized as conceptually distinct phenomena. That is, culture is the set of enduring deep values, beliefs, and assumptions that are produced through the symbolic interactions of organizational members. Alternately, climate is based on individual perceptions of the work environment and is one surface-level manifestation of an organization's culture, making it temporary and subjective to direct control. Thus, culture focuses on the underlying context of assumptions and values that emerge from communication within the organization, whereas climate focuses on the surface features of organizational context and is viewed from individual perceptions. McMurray's (2003) study of culture and climate in a university setting reinforces this view, as aggregated work unit climate scores could be used to estimate the congruence of specific work unit values. The culture-climate relationship is fundamental to the study of organizations. For example,

> creating a climate of teamwork and openness is a common goal nowadays, but it is the rare company that figures out how cultural assumptions about individualism, about managerial prerogatives, and about respect for authority based on past success may make teamwork and openness virtually impossible. (Schein, 2000, pp. xxiii–xxiv)

Martin (2002) argues that the central dispute between the two claims is one of consistency of interpretation. Climate tends to be measured quantitatively, focusing on one or just a handful of cultural manifestations. Indeed, from a management perspective, "only when there is perceptual agreement does an organizational climate objectively

(Continued)

exist" (Dickson, Smith, Grojean, & Ehrhart, 2001, p. 199). Alternately, culture tends to be measured qualitatively and allows for inconsistency in interpretations to exist. However, the distinction between culture and climate is really not one of methodology.

Historically, communication scholars focused on communication-related dimensions—such as supportiveness, trust, openness, participation, decision making—and the concept of *communication climate* became well established (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). On the other hand, management scholars included other dimensions to evaluate, for example, marketing climate and ethical climate, as well as climatic dimensions relative to participation, safety, innovation, justice, and fairness (see Patterson et al., 2005, for their 17-dimension Organizational Climate Measure). Commonly, climate (regardless of what type of climatic characteristic is examined) is conceptualized as a subset of culture.

Thus, the question about the distinctions between culture and climate remain. As Denison (1996) suggests, culture and climate are more likely differences in interpretation than differences in phenomenon. Both address the social context and environment of organizational life. This position is slightly different from Martin's (2002) position about the way in which the two constructs allow for inconsistencies of interpretation. But the point is well taken. Studies of organizational climate rarely, if ever, examine the whole of the organization's climate, nor do they examine the way in which climatic dimensions are independent or interdependent. Nor do climate studies examine the values and assumptions that result in a particular climate or organizational environment. Finally, climate studies do not address political and ideological consequences of organizations (Denison, 1996). Cultural studies, however, are more likely to address or reveal these issues.

Ideally, studies of organizational culture pursue a holistic assessment and look for the ways in which cultural artifacts, values, and assumptions are related—consensual or conflicted. In climate studies, the assumption is that climatic conditions are consistent with one another—that they fit together. Thus, a climatic interpretation would focus on the elements as comprising a whole. Cultural studies from a communicative perspective are not likely to adopt the position that assumptions, values, beliefs, and norms are always consistent with one another. Therein, the richness lies.

❖ MYTHS ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Just as it is useful to explore organizational culture by distinguishing what it is from what it is not, it is also useful to explore popular myths about organizational culture. Anytime a concept becomes popularized, it often becomes so simplified that it loses its vitality and complexity. Such is the case with organizational culture. Exploring the myths of organizational culture can help you appreciate it in its fullest regard.

Myth: What works as culture in one organization will work in another.

Reality: Organizational culture cannot be replicated. Each organization is unique, with different sets of employees, business challenges and opportunities, goals, and resources. Organizational culture is constructed locally, socially, and historically.

Myth: Organizational culture is the responsibility of top management.

Reality: The CEO, president, founder, or the top management team cannot dictate all aspects of an organization's culture. No one person or team is that omnipotent. No one person or team can control the communication activity of all organizational members. Groups and individuals can construct and communicate their views of the organization differently, and all views are legitimate. As a result, culture is self-organizing and always evolving—being shaped and reshaped—but never in an absolute way.

Myth: Organizational culture is the key to success.

Reality: Not necessarily. An organizational culture that is successful at one point may fail in the future; an organizational culture that is successful for one organization will fail at another. Despite the promises from the popular business literature, no one set of cultural elements has been identified and linked to organizational success.

Myth: Talking about changes to the culture will change the culture.

Reality: Espoused values cannot create a culture; only enacted values can.

Myth: Everyone needs to see the culture similarly for a sense of unity to exist.

Reality: Differences and dissonance among organizational members can exist. Acknowledgment of those differences can be the unifying glue that allows two or more groups to work together.

Myth: Organizational culture is not real.

Reality: Organizational culture is a symbolic representation created through communication.

Myth: Organizational culture does not matter. Employees are motivated by money; pay them well enough and they will be productive.

Reality: Money is not the only motivator. People have choices about where and how they work.

Myth: It is easy to see all aspects of an organization's culture.

Reality: No one person can see all aspects of the culture. From any one person's perspective, some aspects of the culture are unknown or unimportant and, thus, out of their awareness.

Myth: It is easy to see or know the culture of an organization.

Reality: Cultural values become embedded in the communicative practices of organizational members and are often not easily detectable. Many times, employees cannot describe the culture in which they work.

Myth: All aspects or elements of organizational culture are positive.

Reality: While managers like to point to the aspects of their organizational culture that are effective, productive, efficient, or beneficial to employees, virtually all organizational cultures have negative elements—aspects that cause uncertainty and conflict, take advantage of or demean employees, or limit organizational innovation.

❖ SUMMARY

There are five core characteristics of organizational culture. Organizational culture is: (a) inextricably linked to organizational members, (b) dynamic, not static, (c) composed of competing assumptions and values, (d) emotionally charged, and (e) both foreground and background for an

organization's communication. Organizational cultures are symbolic performances, as organizational members are simultaneously responding to and creating a social and symbolic reality from which the organizational culture emerges. Thus, organizational culture is communicatively constructed. It is both the process of interacting and the product of those interactions.

Through their communication, organizational members are simultaneously responding to and creating the social and symbolic reality of the organization's culture. Thus, organizational culture is communicatively constructed by all organizational members. It is both the process of interacting and the product of those interactions. Thus, culture can morph and change as employees move in and out of the organizational system and as the organization addresses new opportunities or threats from its environment. This creates opportunities for new practices to emerge, to become patterned, and to be accepted as part of the culture. Organizational members use the social context of their environment to make sense of the organization's communication. The process of identifying the organization's culture is called sensemaking.

Organizational cultures can be structured as a consensus or divided into subcultures. A consensus view of organizational culture would find organizational members having highly similar, or integrated, meanings for cultural elements. From an integration perspective, mutually consistent interpretations are so deeply held that little variation occurs. This type of strong and unified culture is often the goal of management and perceived to be the ideal organizational culture.

To the extent that different sets of artifacts, values, and assumptions develop, an organization's culture is said to have subcultures. Using differentiation, organizational members differentiate into subcultures relative to their inconsistent interpretations, especially along functional or occupational roles; geographical locations; product, market, or technology distinctions; and hierarchical level. From a fragmentation perspective, ambiguity reigns; there is neither clear consistency nor clear inconsistency, making it difficult to see clear subcultural divisions. From this perspective, organizational members are part of shifting coalitions, forming and reforming based on shared identities, issues, and circumstances. Subcultures appear briefly but with boundaries that are permeable and fluctuating. Viewed this way, organizational members have multiple, overlapping identities that make it difficult to create organization-wide consensus.

All three perspectives—integration, differentiation, and fragmentation—should be used in the exploration of organizational culture, as some cultural elements will be shared by members while

other elements will be interpreted differently by various subcultures. Using all three perspectives allows consensus, consistency, and ambiguity to be revealed, and it helps avoid the potential blind spots of each perspective when used alone. Together, the three perspectives encourage three distinct revelations about organizational culture. It is not that one perspective is more correct than another. Rather, each perspective offers an incomplete view of an organization's culture. All three perspectives are needed to offer a multifocal view of organizational culture.

Over time, organizational culture has been conceptualized practically and academically in a variety of ways. By distinguishing organizational culture from other organizational concepts, a clearer picture of organizational culture emerges, and the realities of organizational culture can be separated from common myths.