

Reviving Organizational Culture with the Concept of Tradition: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Paul D. Nugent*, Jennifer Flynn

Abstract

Organizational culture was the darling of Organization Theory and management fads in the 1980s and 1990s. To managers it promised a way to motivate and to increase organizational effectiveness with little investment. And to scholars it represented a more human and anthropological way of framing organizations as bearers of shared meanings, rituals, symbols, ceremonies, and stories. However, over time, top-down corporate approaches to culture change were not reaping the promised benefits and its usefulness to scholars began to wane as they exhausted its theoretical implications and discovered a dark side to culture change programs. We believe that this weakening of culture's importance to organizations and to scholars is partly due to its neglect of the role of tradition in organizations. Tradition represents an informal means by which not only ceremonies, rituals, symbols, etc. may be passed on over time, but more importantly many traditions embody how the work itself is to be performed and evaluated. Therefore, this paper will explore formative works on the concept of tradition and also draw upon social psychological perspectives (namely Symbolic Interactionism (SI)) to theorize why the concept of tradition needs to be added to, and perhaps revive, the literature on organizational culture. This paper explores this theme and its implications for theory, management, and practice.

Keywords: Culture, Tradition, Symbolic Interactionism, Organizational Change

Introduction

This paper considers the role of tradition in organizations. As a transfer of collective knowledge from one group of workers to another across time, tradition has the potential to be functional to the organization and may also contribute to a sense of identity and meaningfulness to those sending and receiving this knowledge.

The central theme of this paper is that organizational and management studies have not fully acknowledged the functional and symbolic aspects of tradition in organizations. In particular, where we would most expect to find this acknowledgment, the field of organizational culture tends to focus on other aspects of informal organization and fails to adequately frame tradition as a distinct organizational phenomenon. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill some of these gaps.

However, in order to understand why tradition may play a critical role in organizations, the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is leveraged because it explicitly acknowledges the importance of "imagined others" in social dealings. Those workers creating or maintaining organizational knowledge understand that it is being passed on to others at a later time and may be valuable. In complement, those receiving this knowledge from their predecessors are likely to respect their contribution. Tradition, therefore, creates a social-psychologically powerful dynamic of self-identity and meaningfulness that one could argue is more direct or more tangible than other types of organizational activities.

Tradition can also be appreciated as an important facet of the "informal" side of organizations. As such, management needs to be sensitive to the positive role it may play in organizations and the potential for increasingly popular process formalization programs to replace it with impersonal practices. Therefore, this paper also examines these trends and considers situations in which they may be dysfunctional to the organization to the extent that they undermine the positive effects of tradition.

Let us begin, however, by reviewing the concept of organizational culture and how it missed the opportunity to adequately acknowledge the social and functional roles of tradition in modern organizations.

Conceptual Framework

Organizational culture

Prior to the 1980s, organization theory and management practice were focused on the formal side of organizational life. Contingency theory, span of control, decision-making theory, etc. framed organizations as rational goal-seeking entities in which any informal practices or beliefs were generally ignored or seen as dysfunctional. However, scholars who observed what was actually taking place in organizations began to see that informal activities were important and instrumental to organizational goals. Rituals, ceremonies, stories, etc. that were previously downplayed were now seen as functional with respect to control, motivation, communication, and leadership (Smircich, 1983; Louis, 1983).

Management quickly seized upon these ideas as promising to increase control and motivation by modifying the culture in various ways (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1985). Soon the term "strong culture" was adopted to refer to cultures that were particularly well-aligned to management's goals and controls. In turn, popular management books providing guidance for the development of strong cultures within organizations proliferated.

Paul D. Nugent*, Ph.D., Western Connecticut State University, Ansell School of Business, White Street, Danbury, CT 06810
Email: nugentp@wcsu.edu

Jennifer Flynn, D.P.S., Western Connecticut State University, Ansell School of Business, White Street, Danbury, CT 06810
Email: flynnj@wcsu.edu

As this management practice became mainstream, researchers began to conduct ethnographies in the organizations claiming to have developed strong cultures and found that the effects were not as win-win as the popular literature had promised. For example, in *Engineering Culture*, Gideon Kunda studied a computer engineering company and found that while employees were coerced into demonstrating public compliance to cultural rituals, ceremonies, and practices, these led to negative side-effects of burn-out, anxiety, and alienation (Kunda, 1992). In the same vein, Arlie Hochschild in the book *The Management Heart*, provided ample evidence that employees in service industries are required to ritually exhibit a positive emotional face to customers and this also led to negative emotional consequences (Hochschild, 1983).

From an organizational theory point of view and based upon the ethnographies previously discussed, the concept of organizational culture began to evolve. Rather than restricting itself to the top-down “strong” versions of cultures with their public rituals, ceremonies, and strict alignment to management’s goals, researchers applied a more anthropological and Interpretivist (e.g., Geertz, 1973) framing of culture that expanded the scope of the organizational culture concept. This expansion was well captured by Joanne Martin in her book *Cultures in Organizations* in which she identifies three basic approaches to organizational culture (Martin, 1992). The first, “integration” captures the top-down strong culture paradigm previously discussed. The second, “differentiation,” acknowledges the political and conflictual facets of culture in which groups in the organization do not always share the same interests. Therefore, the differentiation perspective includes many of the organizational conflicts identified by critical theorists and labor theorists. Finally, the “fragmentation” perspective draws upon many ethnographic studies claiming that the integration and differentiation perspectives are too simplistic and incomplete and ignore important cultural realities such as ambiguity, individual interpretation, local truths, and lack of consensus over organizational goals and practices (Martin, 1992).

In the ensuing decades, the concept of organizational culture began to wane for both practitioners and scholars (Chatman & O’Reilly, 2016). To organizations the return on investment for culture change programs was not obvious and to organizational theorists the concept continued to serve as the bedrock for ethnographic/qualitative methods, but was no longer a concept in and of itself to be further refined and defined.

More to our point here, however, while most treatments of culture draw on Interpretivist definitions of “shared meanings,” rituals, ceremonies, and stories, few consider the causal importance of how actors frame their overall embeddedness in a social world vis-a-vis meaningful “others.” As we will discuss in the next section, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) claims that our social psychology is not merely influenced by our imagination/conception of certain types of others, but that our thoughts and feelings are directly constituted by these dynamics. In other words, to more fully grasp the role of culture in organizations we must also think about the kinds of groups that exist in organizations and how each relates to the individual actor and his or her situation.

Symbolic Interactionism (SI)

“Symbolic Interactionism” is, admittedly, intellectual jargon at its best (or worst). This is unfortunate, as its underlying meaning and purpose are rather simple. Conceived originally by George Herbert Mead in *Mind, Self, & Society* and later formalized by Herbert Blumer, it establishes a necessary theoretical alternative to Skinner’s Behaviorism and Parson’s Structural-Functionalism which allow no internal thought, reflection, or meaning inside the organism and instead restricts scientific study to observation of the organism in relation to defined environments (Mead, 1934, Blumer, 1969). However, Mead saw that with human beings (and other organisms), symbolic meaning plays a central role in behavior. A bark from a dog is not merely a response to an environment, but a communication that stems from the dog’s awareness of others and also an awareness that it is being interpreted by these others. The bark from the dog, or a gesture from a human, or other forms of communication become *abstracted* from their physical (Behavioristic) form and take on a symbolic form in which it *means* something to the parties involved. This symbolic meaning then serves as the primary basis for how human beings in particular interact with one another – thus *symbolic interaction*.

To Mead and to other founders of the SI framework such as Charles Cooley, and Herbert Blumer, SI claimed to more fully explain human conduct, communication, and behavior. Blumer in particular stressed the central role of interpretation in SI:

First, the actor indicates himself to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning. The making of such indications is an internalized social process in that the actor is interacting with himself. The interaction with himself is something other than an interplay of psychological elements; it is an instance of the person engaging in a process of communication with himself. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his actions. [Blumer, 1969, p. 5]

Cooley expands on this in his metaphor of the “looking-glass-self”:

In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one’s self – that is any idea he appropriates – appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass-self:

Each to each a looking-glass
Reflects the other that doth pass. [Kollack & O’Brien, 1994, p. 266]

For our purposes, the key element in all of this is that our very thinking, at subconscious levels, necessarily includes

imagined others and necessarily includes a conception of their evaluations/judgments of us. We align our beliefs and our strategies for action to these others and how they evaluate us. These others may be “specific” others who are in face-to-face interaction with us in the here and now, or they may be “general” others (peer groups, political parties, communities, etc.) that nonetheless need to be taken into account in our thinking. For example, regardless of your political persuasion, there is an “us” and “them” dynamic when we read the news and contemplate the meaning of political actions. We will likely never be in direct face-to-face communication with a politician and the vast majority of his/her followers, yet we imagine their existence and their symbolic force/power. We sense their agreement or disagreement with us and vice-versa.

It is also important to point out that while much of this seems somewhat common-sense, as a dynamic it is, for the most part, unconscious or semi-conscious. We habitually factor into our thinking groups of general others and what they represent, how they would judge us, and how we identify (or not identify) with them, and how our behaviors align or diverge from them. At any given time, then, based upon the situation, one attends to a set of specific others and general others (groups) that have some say in the matter, weighs their relative merits, judgments, consequences, and implications for our own action and self-identity. This “set” of imagined others will be different for each situation and each social setting. It is our belief that organizational culture, while acknowledging the “shared meanings” and the basic SI framework, nonetheless has tended to ignore the role of SI in organizational setting and its capacity to explain employee thoughts and behaviors. It is to this end that we will analyze tradition as an important *imagined generalized other* in organizations that needs to be added to our understanding of organizational culture and self-identity.

As a side-note, it is interesting that the overwhelming majority of SI scholars/studies focus on the influence of specific and general others in the present or future, while tending to ignore the influence of those who came before. Therefore, the concept of tradition has the potential to expand the scope of SI as well.

Tradition

The influence of those who came before or who will come later cannot be ignored. While it may be waning in parts of the Western world, in many cultures there still exists a deep respect for elders, ancestors, and longstanding customs (art, cooking, craft, music, trade, etc.) handed down from generation to generation (Shils, 1981; Bass 2006). Scholars of tradition tend not to adopt an SI perspective, but rather assume that there something of value is being passed along (Pieper, 2010). SI, however, provides a more powerful way of thinking about the social-psychological dynamics of tradition.

From an SI point of view, tradition can also be seen as a form of authority. For example, Max Weber differentiates three forms of authority: *charismatic*, *traditional*, and *rational-legal* (Gerth & Mills, 1946). Charismatic authority applies to a specific other’s sphere of influence, while traditional authority applies to groups (originally the influence of royalty on subordinates), and rational-legal

focuses on the authority embodied in abstract laws and rationality.

From an SI perspective, the “imagined others” represented in traditional authority embody wisdom, innovation, sacrifice, and best practices that are respected and tend to be accepted without question. Those who came before consciously or unconsciously *send* their symbolic meanings to those who will follow with an expectation that they carry some authoritative weight and will be honored. Present day actors, then, *receive* these traditions and include them in their symbolic interactions and failing to do so could result in some informal sanction such as guilt or shame. And to the extent that they are honored and perpetuated, the actor feels a sense of meaningfulness and belonging (“being part of a tradition”). While not a central theme here, established traditions may change or die over time and at any given moment an actor may have to weigh multiple traditions that may be in conflict with one another, perhaps exemplified by adolescent rebellion or Huck Finn’s moral dilemmas.

Scholars of history and self-identity claim a loss of meaning as traditions give way to rational-legal authority. Tradition embeds the individual in a temporal project in which they are a participant or carrier and this represents, from an SI perspective, a social relationship with imagined others. With the rise of consumer culture and rational-legal authority, as actors choose to abandon tradition, they abandon the imagined social relationships bound up in it, which may lead to social forms of narcissism and alienation (Taylor, 2007; Giddens, 1991).

Tradition in organizations

We argue that the tradition may play an important role in organizations. As mentioned earlier, organizational culture has tended to downplay the role of tradition. In fact, with a few exceptions (Feldman, 2007; Plumba et al., 2017), most frame tradition as a kind of inertia that prevents organizations from embracing the current management *zeitgeist* of continuous improvement and change (Brorstrom, 2004; Aberg, 2015). Yet within organizations each generation of workers has made innovations and sacrifices leading to the organization’s success and has developed work values/processes that may continue to be objective “best practices.” Yet there has been a growing trend for organizations to adopt enterprise-level programs such as *Six Sigma*, *CMMI*, *ITTL*, and *Lean* that represent a presumably universal rational-legal challenge to traditional authority. These programs are adopted primarily in response to institutional pressures for legitimacy (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), yet they promise to optimize various work practices and knowledge domains that were previously controlled informally by tradition.

This leads to various organizational problems. From a purely functional point of view, while consistency across processes can improve efficiency, many work processes evolved by the informal group and passed on by tradition were cultivated in a context of what some scholars call “profound knowledge” and therefore apply worker experience and local situational knowledge to solve problems (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Henriksen, 2001). Therefore, where an optimal process may indeed be in effect, the underlying philosophy of enterprise-level programs *assumes* the existing processes are sub-optimal and that

tradition represents a resistance to improvement and thus may lead to a move away from the optimal condition (Nugent, 2016).

Evaluations of quality in organizations prior to these programs were also in the province of informal knowledge and tradition. After these programs were implemented, there was an observable shift in responsibility for quality from the informal group and tradition to those in the organization who implement and sanction these new formal processes (the “process owners”). As a result, there becomes a disconnect between those who are responsible/accountable for the processes (process owners) and those who have experience and profound knowledge of the process (workers: “not my problem anymore”), leading to dysfunctional outcomes (Nugent, 2016; Nugent & Collar 2014).

More importantly, from an SI point of view, tradition may serve, as it does in broader society, to provide a sense of participation in a collective endeavor that spans time and gives purpose and meaning to one’s self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Whether the tradition-sender or the tradition-receiver, one experiences a relationship with others across time that is deemed valuable and important. As change programs are implemented in organizations they have the potential to disrupt tradition and the meanings they have to the workers that can result in alienation. The veteran workers perceive their potential contributions to newcomers to be no longer honored and respected, while the newcomers are trained to ignore the wisdom of the past finding themselves cut off from any personal connection to it and left to a purely bureaucratic work environment.

Discussion and Implications

By adopting a SI perspective, we have been able to highlight an important facet of culture, tradition, that has been overlooked. The concept of tradition and its symbolic interactionist dynamics promises to reinforce and extend the literature on organizational culture. In particular, organizational culture tends to focus on symbols and artifacts rather than on the temporal dynamics of traditions that are arguably more meaningful to individual self-identity and motivation. Tradition functional contributes toward a sense of meaningfulness that derives from a social connection with others over time. In both broader society and within organizations, changes are occurring that erode tradition and replace it with rational-legal authority structures.

SI, as a theoretical framework, can also be strengthened by the concept of tradition. Most research done in the SI vein tend to emphasize its social constructivist aspects (new meaning created through social exchanges) and therefore do not fully acknowledge the social-psychological significance of imagined others (givers and receivers) who exchange value across time via tradition.

This thesis offers practical insights to management as well. While in many instances this may correct for situations in which traditions are inefficient or unethical, in other instances this can “kill the goose that laid the golden egg” and was responsible for the core value creation in organizations and also lead to various forms of alienation. This is an invitation to management to be sensitive to the potential negative impacts of formal change programs and to ensure that those who have been responsible for the

organization’s success in the past continue to be respected and able to carry on those traditions.

References

- Aberg, P. (2015). "Myths and Traditions as Constraints or Resources? Path Dependency and Decoupling Strategies among Civil Society Organizations," *Journal of Civil Society*, 11 (1).
- Bass, R., (2006). "The Role of Tradition in Concealing and Grounding Truth: Two Opposing Freudian Legacies on Truth and Tradition," in *American Imago*, Vol. 63, No. 3, pp. 331-353.
- Blumer, H., (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism*. University of California Press.
- Brorstrom, B. & Siverbo, S. (2004). "Deeply Rooted Traditions and the Will to Change—Problematic Conflicts in Three Swedish Health Care Organizations," *Journal of Economic Issues*, 38 (4).
- Chatman, J. A. & O'Reilly, C. A. (2016). "Paradigm lost: Reinvigorating the study of organizational culture," *Research in Organizational Behavior*. Elsevier.
- Deal, T. E. & Kennedy, A. A. (1982). *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. Addison-Wesley.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Gerth, H. & Mills, W. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Oxford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Stanford University Press.
- Feldman, S. P. (2007). "Moral Memory: Why and How Moral Companies Manage Tradition," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 72, pp. 395-409.
- Henriksen, L. (2001). "Knowledge Management and the Missing Tradition – On the Role of Tradition, Knowledge and Competencies in Industrial Production," *Studies in Cultures, Organisations, and Societies*, Vol. 7, pp. 81-104.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kunda, G. (1992). *Engineering Culture*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia.
- Louis, M. R. (1983). "Organizations as Culture-Bearing Milieux," in L. R. Pondy et. al. eds. *Organizational Symbolism*, pp. 55-65. JAI Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self & Society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*. Oxford.
- Nugent, P. D., Montague, R., & Collar, E. (2016). "The Dilemma of the Optimal Condition: an Exploration of the Strategic and Social Consequences of the Organizational Change Imperative." *International Journal of Management Science and Business Administration*, 2 (9), 47-53.
- Nugent, P. D. (2016). "Bureaucracy 2.0: The Bureaucratization of Professional Work," in *Issues in Information Systems Journal*, 17 (1), pp. 128-135.
- Nugent, P. D. & Collar, E. (2014). "The hidden perils of addressing complexity with formal process: a philosophical and empirical analysis," in *Complex Systems Design and Management*.
- Pieper, J. (2010). *Tradition: Concept and Claim*. St. Augustine's Press.
- Plumba, J. J., Hainsa, I., Parrb, M. J., Millissc, D., Herkesc, R. & Westbrooka, J. I. (2017). "Technology meets tradition: The perceived impact of the introduction of information and communication technology on ward rounds in the intensive care unit." *International Journal of Medical Informatics*.
- Powell, W. W. & DiMaggio, P. J. (Eds.) (1991). *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Shils, E. (1981). *Tradition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Smircich, L. (1983). "Organizations as Shared Meanings," in L. R. Pondy et. al. eds. *Organizational Symbolism*, pp. 55-65. JAI Press.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Belknap Press.