National, Organizational and Professional Cultures

Numerous social groups have been identified as possessing a distinctive culture. Social psychologist Geert Hofstede's research concentrated mainly on national culture. However, he also noted that a range of other social groups, or categories of people, may be distinguished by their culture, or their "collective programming of the mind":

> The 'category of people' may be a nation, a region or an ethnic group, women or men (gender culture), old or young (age group and generation culture), a social class, a profession or occupation (occupational culture), a type of business, a work organization or part of it (organizational culture), or even a family. (Hofstede, 1994, p. 8)

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997, p. 7) narrowed their focus to three important social levels on which culture is exhibited: (1) "the culture of a national or regional society"; (2) "the way in which attitudes are expressed within a specific organisation"; and (3) "the culture of particular functions within organisations" where people "tend to share certain professional and ethical orientations".

For aviation studies, a similar approach has been adopted. Initially, research on culture was largely concentrated on the national level, but subsequently the organizational and professional levels were also embraced. This approach was codified in a seminal study of the effects of culture in aviation and medicine by Helmreich and Merritt (1998). Culture was divided into the overlapping constructs of **national**, **organizational** and **professional cultures**, as illustrated in Figure 1. Such an approach has continued to inform research in aviation and other areas such as international business (Dahlstrom & Heemstra, 2009; Helmreich et al., 2001; Sirmon & Lane, 2004).

Figure 1: Venn diagram of national, organizational and professional cultures.

National Culture

Helmreich and Merritt (1998, p. 103) stated that national cultures embody unique characteristics derived from multiple sources: "National culture is a product of heritage. Religion, history, language, climate, population density, availability of raw materials and resources, political movements and wealth all play a role in the development of unique national characteristics." The idea that national cultures may be differentiated by unique characteristics is intuitively appealing, since nations often exhibit clear differences in their economic, political and educational systems (Sirmon & Lane, 2004). A large amount of research has been carried out to identify dimensions along which national cultures may be differentiated, most notably by Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997).

One significant limitation of the construct of national culture is that it ignores variations between the regions or peoples making up a particular nation (Dahlstrom & Heemstra, 2009). The regions of a nation may, for instance, have significant differences in their religion, history, language or climate. Macdonald (1995) examined this issue, citing the examples of Japan and Australia. She argued that national culture, as a product of the nationalism which created modern nation states, prevents the expression of intra-national cultural diversity.

Organizational Culture

There are numerous definitions of organizational culture. One of the simplest describes it figuratively as "social or normative glue that holds an organization together" (Smircich, 1983, p. 344). This metaphor imparts the idea that organizational culture provides some kind of control over the behaviour and attitudes of an organization's members (Sirmon & Lane, 2004).

Another way of defining organizational culture is to think of it "as the shared assumptions, values, beliefs, language, symbols, and meanings systems in an organization" (Tracy, 2009, p. 713). Using a similar definition, Helmreich and Merritt (1998, pp. 109-110) outlined two separate layers of organizational culture:

- an outer layer consisting of "observable behaviors and recognizable physical manifestations such as members' uniforms, symbols and logos, organizational routines and rituals, and printed documents";
- an inner layer made up of values, beliefs and assumptions "which underlie the surface structure and provide the logic which guides the members' behaviors".

There may be considerable variation within the organizational culture of a single company. In terms of Helmreich and Merritt's outer layer, an organization's symbols and rituals are not necessarily shared by all of its members. In an airline, cabin crew and pilots wear different uniforms and are guided in their work by different operating procedures. Furthermore, distinct **subcultures**[1] may exist within a large company. In an airline, these subcultures may lead to differences in, for example, attitudes towards automation or CRM training in different airplane fleets (FAA, 1996).

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[1] A subculture is defined as "a category of people who share distinguishing attributes, beliefs, values, and/or norms that set them apart in some significant manner from the dominant culture" (Kendall, 2007, p. 90). Guirdham (2005) noted that the alternative term **co-culture** is sometimes used to avoid connotations of superiority and inferiority.

Adopting a problem-solving perspective, Schein (1985, p. 9) provided an alternative definition of organizational culture:

> …a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

This definition encompasses the processes of formal training and informal learning that take place in organizations in order to sustain common assumptions and approaches to problems.

Organizational culture is sometimes referred to as **company culture** or **corporate culture** (Strauch, 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Strictly speaking these alternative terms are more restrictive as they only apply to organizations whose purpose is to make a profit (Dahlstrom & Heemstra, 2009).

Professional Culture

Sirmon and Lane (2004, p. 311) observed that a professional culture "exists when a group of people who are employed in a functionally similar occupation share a set of norms, values and beliefs related to that occupation". Professional culture, also referred to as **occupational culture**, transcends individual organizations. It develops through a process of socialization that occurs during occupational education, personnel selection, training and on-the-job experience. As a result, individuals learn professional culture (and also organizational culture) at a later age than national culture, which is acquired from birth (Hofstede, 1994).

The boundaries between organizational and professional cultures are fuzzy. Sirmon and Lane (2004) distinguished the professional cultures that exist within certain functional areas of an organization (eg: accounting, sales or marketing) from the organizational subcultures in the same company that link people with common backgrounds (eg: ethnic, educational or regional). Guirdham (2005, p. 65) reasoned that occupational social groups "do not meet the full criteria for cultures". She argued that occupational groups (as well as other social categories such as gender or social class groups) should instead be considered **subcultures** because they typically conform to some norms and values of the dominant culture while deviating from others.

The construct of professional culture would appear to be more relevant to some occupations than others. A case study by Stewart highlighted considerable differences in the decision making styles of engineers and nontechnical managers (as cited in Kume, 2009). Within aviation, Chute and Wiener (1995, 1996) investigated differences between the "two cultures" of pilots and flight attendants. They examined factors that impacted crew communication and flight safety, including differences in operational knowledge and attitudes to work.

In the context of aviation and medicine, Helmreich and Merritt (1998) stated that the characteristics of a professional culture include a sense of belonging to a community and the passing on of norms and values by senior to junior members. They noted that, for both doctors

and pilots, "professional membership can provide a much stronger bond than company loyalty or national identity" (Helmreich & Merritt, 1998, p. 30).

Interplay of National, Organizational and Professional Cultures

A member of an organization may also be a member of a profession, a country, a religion and various other social groups, all of which influence the individual's behaviour and, by extension, the values and norms he or she introduces into the organization (Grote et al., 2004). It is difficult to distinguish between these influences and in some cases the constructs overlap. Hutchins et al. (2002, p. 36) noted that even in the analysis of routine radio exchanges between pilots and ATC "where the authors…are well versed in the national, organizational and professional cultures surrounding the activity, it is difficult to identify the boundaries of the different sorts of culture".

Within a single organization, the relative influence of the three constructs may vary markedly depending on individuals' working contexts. Dahlstrom and Heemstra (2009) described the impact of culture on operations at a large multicultural airline. They stated that professional culture is much more important than organizational culture for pilots at the airline, in contrast to cabin crew and ground staff. Reasons for the relative importance of pilot professional culture include: the similarity of uniforms and procedures across the profession, international regulations and worldwide standards for pilot training, and the limited amount of contact with other members of the organization. The airline in question has approximately 100 nationalities amongst its flight crew but no dominant national group. Therefore, the influence of national culture is also diminished when compared with flag carriers such as British Airways (in the UK) or Japan Airlines (in Japan).

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