

# Researching Organizational Culture Using the Grounded Theory Method

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**Abstract:** Researching organizational culture using the grounded theory method is intuitively logical, given the ease of conceptualising organizational culture as a basic social process. In spite of its intuitive appeal, there are numerous challenges along the research voyage that could facilitate or jeopardise the unsuspecting researcher's investigation. The aim of this paper is to alert prospective researchers, to some of the critical considerations that arise when designing and conducting research of this nature. The paper first tackles issues that are related to the conceptualisation of organizational culture as the phenomenon of interest, before turning to the research design implications. Research considerations that are related to the conceptualisation of organizational culture and the formulation of the research, include (1) the school of thought that the researcher embraces and the implications of its research traditions; (2) the assumptions made about the nature of organizational culture (such as its degree of uniformity or variation, its definition and construction, and its stability and development over time) and the implications for its investigation; (3) the contextual characteristics of the study (such as the size of the organization being investigated) and their implications for the manifestation of organizational culture; and (4) the researcher's values and interests and their implications for accessing credible data. Other than the implications of conceptualisation of organizational culture on the formulation of the research problem, further research design considerations discussed include (1) aligning the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions with the assumptions made about organizational culture; (2) identifying sources of data and techniques for its collection, that are appropriate to the conceptualisation of culture and its temporal characteristics in particular; and (3) reconciling the level of data collection with its level of analysis in order to aggregate and reconcile various individual perspectives of a collective social construct.

**Keywords:** grounded theory; organizational culture; research design

## 1. Introduction

According to Goulding (1999:6), grounded theory developed as part of a movement that was inspired to narrow the gap between what she calls "theoretically uninformed" empirical research and empirically "uninformed" research, proposing the inducing of theory from data. The original rationale of the grounded theory method was to discover or generate a well integrated, inductive theory that accounts for a pattern of behaviour, and which is relevant to those involved (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In subsequent decades, there has been a surge in the use of grounded theory in disciplines beyond sociology, including marketing and business management (Baker 2002; Goulding 1999); social work, nursing and health studies (Cutcliffe 2000); and psychology (Henwood and Pidgeon 1992).

The roots of grounded theory are closely associated with symbolic interactionism, which Kendall (1999) suggests has a similar emphasis being placed on meaning and action in contexts where social interaction is on-going, reciprocal and varied. Hebert Blumer, an early proponent of symbolic interactionism, offers three tenets that form its basis (Allard and Anderson 2005), namely (1) that people act towards things based on the meaning those things have for them; (2) that these meanings are derived through interaction with other people; and (3) that meanings are managed and transformed through a process of interpretation and self-reflection. Symbolic interactionism and the grounded theory method emphasize the actor's perspectives of reality in the interpretation of that reality (Goulding 1999). Symbolic interactionism creates a framework for a researcher to enter the world of those being studied, understand and construct the meanings that objects, words or gestures have for the actors as individuals, members of groups and communities, while they are engaged in purposeful and reflexive interaction (Berg 2007). Another similarity is the emphasis on developing a contextual understanding of how people behave within a specific social context (Parker and Roffey 1997). Creswell (2007) argues that the use of grounded theory permits the researcher to study the meanings that events have for people acting in a social context. Furthermore, Goulding (1998) states that grounded theory enables researchers to systematically study human interactions in a way that embraces the interrelationship between action, the conditions in the environment shaping the action, and the consequences of taking action.

The grounded theory method is specifically characterized by the development of new theory, which is generated by focusing on basic social processes, interaction, or action that is identified in incidents by the people who have experienced the phenomena (Goulding 1999; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded theorists seek to identify patterns in the social processes present in the human interaction being studied and ultimately to explain "a considerable portion of the action in an area" (Backman and Kyngas 1999:148). Schwandt (1994) advises that a researcher in grounded theory is expected to go beyond a thick description of the experiences of the participants, and to develop theory which has explanatory power within the participants' milieu. Organizational culture is concerned with processes involved in creating meaning and action, and so at first glance, researching organizational culture using the grounded theory method is intuitively logical, given the symbolic interactionist roots of grounded theory and the ease of conceptualising organizational culture as a basic social process. In spite of its intuitive appeal, there are numerous currents and eddies along the research voyage that could either facilitate or "scuttle" the unsuspecting researcher's investigation. The aim of this paper is to alert prospective researchers to some of the critical considerations that arise when conducting research of this nature. The paper first tackles issues that are related to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of organizational culture as the phenomenon of interest, before turning to other research design considerations.

## **2. Conceptualising and operationalising studies of organizational culture**

When embarking on a research enquiry, it is generally accepted that the phenomenon being investigated has a bearing on the formulation of the research problem, the consequent design of the research, and its implementation. Here, four considerations are discussed, namely: the theoretical position or school of thought assumed by the researcher; the nature of the organization culture phenomenon itself; the context within which the phenomenon is manifested; and the researcher's value position and area of interest in relation to the phenomenon.

### **2.1 Schools of thought**

Within every field of enquiry, there are various schools of thought or "research tribes" who contest the field, seeking to establish their own position and to discredit opposing views. The study of organizational culture is no exception (Sackman 1991). Conceptually, the researcher needs to identify the tribes marking their territory in the study of organizational culture and consider what this means for the research and its design. One approach to identifying tribes is to directly identify the various research conventions that are typically adopted. Therefore one of the functions of the literature review is not only to establish the current state of development of the research field, but also to develop an understanding of the research methods and techniques that have been used (Creswell 2007). One potential area of original contribution that the researcher may attempt to make, may well be to use a unique research design to further advance the understanding of the organization culture phenomenon.

Several authors have constructed typologies of organizational culture (c.f. Scott et al. 2003) emanating from a quantitative perspective and seeking to measure various dimensions of a given culture at a specific point in time and location. A variation of this approach is adopted by Hofstede (1980) and others, who also follow a quantitative approach, but emphasize the influence of national culture on local organizations (e.g. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). Alternatively, Schein (1996a) and others subscribe to the qualitative perspective of culture and define culture as a deep phenomenon which is manifested at various levels and, they argue, cannot and should not be measured quantitatively. The researcher should therefore appreciate that some research designs and tribes are complementary, while others are not. For example, quantitative conceptualisations of culture will not easily lend themselves to grounded theory methods, while qualitative approaches will.

### **2.2 The nature of organizational culture and implications for its investigation**

Related to, but separate from considerations of the school of thought that the researcher adopts, is the conceptualisation of the phenomenon itself. The researcher's assumptions about the nature of organizational culture will shape what the researcher is looking for and how it can be accessed. This is illustrated here by examining the assumptions made about the uniformity of culture, the definition and conceptualisation of culture that is subscribed to, and the time dimension of culture.

Organizational culture can be assumed to be uniform, differentiated or fragmented (Martin and Frost 2004). The integrationist perspective focuses on patterns, commonalities, or the wide appeal within

the organization as a cohesive whole. Scholars subscribing to this perspective refer to culture as “collective consciousness” or “collective programming” (Hofstede 1980); and “underlying shared assumptions” (Schein, 1984) or simply group values (Sackman 1991). This view focuses on consensus, common sets of values, and norms that are clearly expressed and understood by the majority within an organization, enabling members to behave in a meaningful way towards others and to interpret the meaning of the behaviour of others’ various contexts (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004). Consequently, culture is considered a unitary outcome, a state which belongs to the organization, and which is relatively stable. Researchers guided by this view have tended to try and unpack cultural manifestations through interviews with a number of individuals and then ascertain the degree of consensus. Alternatively they will determine if interviewees respond in ways similar enough to make reasonable inferences that they are operating with the same understanding of cultural aspects. In modern organizations, these shared values are typically expressed as mission, vision and value statements, as well as in other artefacts.

A differentiated perspective acknowledges cultural heterogeneity and plurality within organizations, as well as the potential for conflicting sets of values or beliefs (Martin 1992). Culture is therefore based on the view that consensus can exist to a greater or lesser extent and contends that integration of culture occurs only within a sub-culture - but that even at this level inconsistencies are likely to exist. According to Johnson (2000) individuals may have varying beliefs about many aspects of their organizational world, but there is some level of agreement of core sets of assumptions, without which an organization could not function. This assumption of some degree of consensus, distinguishes the differentiation perspective from the fragmentation perspective, which conceptualizes culture as a continuously changing reality, fragmented through disruptions of short-lived cultural episodes. This would be typified by the various sub-cultures developing in project teams, for example. While the researcher may emphasize one perspective over the others, Martin and Frost (2004) contend that any organization has aspects of integration, differentiation and fragmentation, and argue that researchers should therefore take all the three perspectives into account to understand the dynamics of culture more fully.

Additionally, the researcher needs to carefully attend to the definition and construction of organizational culture that is adopted. Quantitative designs of studies of organization culture pre-determine the dimensions of culture to be investigated (Kotter and Heskett 1992). These pre-determined conceptualisations often adopt formal abstractions that were not initially grounded in observed reality (Schein 1996b) and their etic or outsider approach to researching culture gathers fairly simple, universal, aspects of culture. Subcultures are largely ignored because of using standardised instruments to measure patterns of behaviour and values. Furthermore, the reduction of the complex phenomena of culture into static and broad dimensions can be stereotypical, limiting, and lacking depth and dynamism (Hofstede, *et al.* 1990).

On the other hand, some conceptualisations of organizational culture assume that it is manifested at various levels and that these levels also reflect differing depths of awareness or consciousness. For example, according to Schein (1984) some levels of culture are unconscious in that those who are in the culture may find it difficult to recognize cultural characteristics because they have taken them for granted (Schein 1990). Generally, scholars who have adopted a multi-level perspective also recognise that this reflects different levels of cultural consciousness in terms of implicit and explicit aspects of culture; with the outer layers of culture being more visible and objective, while the less conscious core of culture is deeper, implicit, invisible and subjective (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). Comparatively, the outer, more superficial aspects of culture lend themselves to objective and quantitative research designs, while the deeper cultural aspects are more accessible through qualitative approaches such as grounded theory.

Another conceptual feature to be considered is the stability and development of organizational culture over time. The grounded theory researcher has various temporal perspectives to consider as he/she studies basic social processes in an organizational setting. It is argued that organization culture is always in construction, so that an understanding of the present is informed by a construction of past reality and relating events that occurred over time in an organization’s life. Pettigrew (1997:340) observes that “proccesual” studies have temporal modalities or interconnection of the past, the present and the future. This raises the question of whether the study should be designed as a retrospective reflection by participants; simply focus on real-time; or combine both. The retrospective design requires further clarity on how far back one can go without amplifying problems of recall by

participants or how hindsight bias distorts the past events which participants express. On the other hand real-time studies engender problems of access and failure to capture fortuitous activities. In addition to this, Miller (1979:22) conceives two different temporal aspects of process namely, passage which relates to processes of “being, perishing and duration”; while temporal chronology, or order, focuses on whether events occur before, after or alongside other things or events, and their time of occurrence. This has implications for researching the present culture which is historically rooted or has evolved from the earlier culture (Pettigrew 1997). The paradigm model by Strauss and Corbin (1990) may address the horizontal temporal connections of the basic process of culture (e.g. past, present and future) while the conditional matrix (Strauss and Corbin 1990) helps to relate the various vertical contextual levels of culture (e.g. sub-culture, sector, and national levels). While elements of passage may be accounted for in this way, the researcher has to initially establish the temporal chronology, which the coding schemes of grounded theory could overlook.

### **2.3 The context within which organizational culture is manifested**

The context within which the study occurs will also influence culture’s conceptualisation. For example, in comparison to a large corporate, studies of small family businesses are less likely to have different, formalised, sub-cultures at various levels or in various sections of the enterprise (Haugh and McKee 2004). Cultural differences between large and small firms emanate not simply from their size difference, but rather from the impact size has on the strength of culture, strategic direction, execution of managerial activities and performance. It is argued that the context of smaller firms is characterised by owners seeking independence and a higher level of owner-manager control over the business (Haugh and McKee 2004); frequent, informal communication between employees and customers (Ram 1991 cited in Haugh and McKee 2004); and informal and unpredictable relationships between employees and their employer. Ultimately, the centralization of power suggests that strategists are also the day-to-day decision makers in the firm (Haugh and McKee 2004). This would mean that in smaller enterprises the researcher should more easily recognise the roles of leaders and followers as the creators and shapers of culture. Finally, leaders of smaller firms may serve both business and family leadership roles and also oversee matters of family loyalty and discipline. This could bring to bear a unique factor as a shaper of organizational culture.

### **2.4 The researcher’s value position and interest**

The fourth main consideration related to the organizational culture concept, is the researcher’s value position and interest in studying the topic and any associated concepts (e.g. competitive advantage, performance, strategy). This has potential ethical implications and may affect disclosure by participants of relevant, but sensitive information. The organizational researcher needs to be aware that some organizations or their members see research as an intrusion, and may be unwilling participants, sensitive to questioning, or sceptical of the research objectives and agenda. This can affect access to the research site. The researcher should also be aware that information may be affected if participants fear being reprimanded for harbouring views that are different from cultural or organizational leaders. The researcher therefore has the ethical responsibility of addressing concerns of individual privacy and confidentiality, disclosure, and informed consent.

## **3. Research design considerations**

Thus far, attention has been given to the effects and implications of the conceptualisation and operationalisation of organization culture on the formulation of the research problem of a grounded theory study. Besides the research formulation implications discussed above, there are other research design considerations that the researcher needs to reflect on. The following are discussed below: (1) the researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions, (2) identifying appropriate sources of data and techniques for collection, and (3) reconciling the level of data collection versus its level of analysis.

### **3.1 The researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions**

There are currently two main approaches to grounded theory – a Glaserian and a Straussian school – which hold differing ontological assumptions. Grounded theory following the Glaserian approach adopts a realist ontology, and the researcher is guided by neutrality and detachment, so as not to “contaminate” data and the theory (Glaser 1992). Ontologically, culture is more likely to be seen as objective; relatively static; and a property of a group that is relatively stable. Consequently, use of this approach may be limited to the external and objective aspects of culture, which the participant is more

willing and comfortable to share with an outsider. The grounded theory researcher may be less engaged, and a distanced expert who may have difficulty in accessing the unconscious cultural assumptions of participants (which would require a more subjective interaction).

Alternatively, in the Straussian approach, which leans towards a relativist ontology (Annells 1996), culture would be viewed as socially constructed by several people interacting with one another in a given context, who all have different views of the culture. As such, studying culture requires gaining a deeper insight of the phenomena and the meaning it has for all of those who are experiencing it, and the researcher interacts with participants to understand their subjective reality. As Schwandt (1994:18) observes, the researcher gives his “construction of the constructions of the actors one studies”. The type of interaction and the level of intensity of closeness between the researcher and the researched will vary with the degree of cultural awareness or consciousness of participants. That is, a more intense level of interaction may be required if research participants have a low consciousness of the culture.

The ontological assumptions of the version of grounded theory advocated by Strauss, seems to be better aligned to the view of culture as a social reality which is in a continuous process of construction and is stable only temporarily (Martin and Frost 2004). Culture comprises of the multiple and subjective perspectives of members. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) the researcher interacts closely and continuously with the data in the process of generating theory rather than suspending his judgement and values until all the data is analysed.

The constructionist perspective of grounded theory inherent in the Straussian School emphasizes that it is not actually possible for the researcher to be completely neutral, as analysis is the interplay between the researcher and the data and the “story” in grounded theory reflects the views of both the researcher and the researched (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The multiple views of participants involved in the context also help to capture the full complexity of phenomena. An insider experience of phenomena is also subjectively different from that of the outsider, and so adopting an emic perspective in the research of culture, allows the researcher as a relative outsider to contrast his beliefs with those of the participants, and thereby gain a deeper understanding of culture through close and interactive co-construction of reality. The potential danger here is one of undue bias, where the theory that is constructed may be based primarily on the interpretations made by the researcher and thereby dilutes the participants’ perspectives. Given the subjectivist epistemology of the researcher that is adopted here, Creswell (2007) advises researchers to give an account for their personal experiences and explain how this may have impacted the study.

### **3.2 Identifying appropriate sources of data and techniques for collection**

The researcher needs to identify sources of data relevant to the conceptualisation of culture, and data collection techniques which correspond with the level of cultural consciousness of research respondents or participants. Quantitative researchers typically use standardised, pre-designed and value-free survey instruments to study the more visible, audible, tangible and conscious aspects of culture (Schein 1996b). Some qualitative researchers such as Pettigrew (1990) suggest the studying of culture is equivalent to a stream of social drama, and view organizational culture at a relatively high level of consciousnesses, examining the daily routines and rituals both retrospectively and in real time in a longitudinal study. Here the researcher presumes that the members of a cultural group are aware of what is cultural. An alternative qualitative approach assumes a lower level of awareness of culture. For example, in accessing culture at the level of basic assumptions, Schein (1984) proposes a process of reflection by participants on a stream of “critical” incidents, in order to access culture at the sub-conscious level and understand the forces shaping the culture. Schein (1984) suggests an interactive and joint exploration in an interview or focus group, so as to raise the level of cultural consciousness of insider participants and thereby access the social reality. The collaborative relationship with insiders as co-researchers may enhance disclosure, reflection and the joint exploration of meaning in a culture.

However, Partington (2000) cautions that interviews are retrospective, second-hand accounts relayed by the interviewee, rather than accounts directly observed and captured by the researcher. In dealing with the unconscious, there is the possibility that true motivations may even remain hidden from the actor (Izzo, 2003), and therefore not divulged in the interview. As a result, the researcher is unable to assess the extent to which there has been either deliberate or unintentional bias in providing either a more socially desirable or logical account. In the light of these weaknesses of interview-based data,

the researcher will have to decide on the advisability and feasibility of collecting other types of data. Consideration will also have to be given to the prospects of combining historical and real time perspectives of culture that are available in various data forms. Historical data such as documentary or archive materials can inform the context of social interaction and past culture; complementing real time data collected to understand the present culture, and accessed through interviews and/or observation.

### **3.3 Reconciling the level of data collection versus its level of analysis**

Culture is largely conceived as a group-level phenomenon, whereby shared knowledge influences perceptions, thoughts, values and behaviours of individuals in their social interactions (Maznevski *et al.* 2002). Pettigrew (1979) contends that an understanding of everyday routines, symbols and core assumptions helps explain collective framing of issues, and collective responses to such issues and problems. Cultural knowledge is distributed across individual minds to arrive at a culturally best estimate of what one would require to know to function effectively, relative to a particular aspect (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004). While culture is shared collectively, it is also inherent and entrenched in the minds of individual group members. Based on "cultural competence" (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004) it is argued that organisational representatives can adequately describe the culture of their organisation, such that some scholars even view a single respondent as adequately representative to reveal the culture shared by the members in a group (Maznevski *et al.*, 2002). Other individual-level cultural analyses define possible patterns among individual's preferences and aggregate measures of culture so as to develop a description of culture and examine variances within and across (sub)organizational cultures.

The collection and analysis of data from individuals is criticized for both ignoring the social aspects of culture, and thereby failing to examine the degree of sharing of culture among members; as well as not acknowledging that some of the cultural aspects exist outside of conscious thinking, and so individuals do not have a full knowledge of their culture (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004). This critique also discredits the aggregation of scores of individuals to analyze group level phenomena, as this approach would exclude the interaction needed to access "culture [that] exists between minds" (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004:267). Other scholars recommend that a collective perspective should be obtained by interviewing a group of people collectively, so as to promote social control and thereby minimise the emergence of individual cultural interpretations. Alternatively, data collected at the individual level may be discussed and checked at a group level, which may include both interviewees and those not interviewed.

This has implications for the collating of data and verification of findings. When moving from individual to collective representations of culture, the grounded theorist should clarify his or her perspective on triangulation. An ontology assuming multiple realities from actors contradicts the notion of using triangulation for convergence. The attempt to triangulate individual perspectives of culture to check consistency or validity would actually be futile. However, the view that a core set of assumptions create coherence and functionality of an organizations suggests the grounded theorist may use triangulation (e.g. organizational level feedback) to confirm these core assumptions by asking other people in the organization for their views. The challenge for the researcher is to specify the degree of cultural consensus resulting from different perspectives of the same organization that would qualify a cultural assumption to be regarded as a part of the core.

## **4. Conclusion**

This paper has served to illuminate the various conceptual challenges and research design implications for a grounded theory study of organisation culture. In particular, the paper has served to highlight the impact that the characteristics of the phenomenon of interest has on the formulation and design of a grounded theory study. In researching organisation culture, the researcher needs to be conscious of the contextual and historical features that shape the current culture. Furthermore, culture should be assumed to be only temporarily stable, within an unremitting chain of changes that continuously shape the culture.

The nature of the interplay of the research method with the conceptual phenomenon being investigated has also been illustrated. This has highlighted some of the typical assumptions and key considerations that the researcher needs to grapple with to ensure that the research voyage is secure in terms of conceptualising the phenomenon of interest, and the research design. Further research is

required to examine whether researchers follow these guidelines in their research practice and what the implications are for the quality of the research that is produced.

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