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Towards a Cultural Understanding of Academic Worlds

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The person to whom this book represents a tribute spent much of his life in an academic world. It is a complex place, inhabited by strange and sometimes idiosyncratic beings who align themselves with particular discipline groupings, from accounting to zoology. In this essay the author notes that the academic world has been analysed from many different perspectives, but argues that one of the most effective means of doing so is through the adoption of a cultural framework using a values-and-beliefs perspective.

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, a significant body of literature—predominantly north-American in origin—has emerged on universities, their staff and students. Much of the literature constitutes descriptive accounts of the histories of individual institutions (universities and colleges) as social organisations (see, for example, Southgate, 1982; Davis, 1990); these have been helpful for the purpose intended, as have the analytical approaches to uncovering reasons for institutional emergence, growth and organisation (see, for example, Cobban, 1975).

Within an organisational theory framework, universities have been conceptualised in many different ways, most notably in terms of functions and formal structures. Examples of better-known theoretical depictions include Weick's (1976) loose coupling and the well-known bureaucratic (Weber 1922; Dalin 1978) and collegiate models (Bergquist, 1992; Harvey, 1995). Discussed briefly below, emphasis in these models—arguably misplaced—has tended to be on organisational form as visible in charts and committee structures, rather than on broader cultural phenomena.

2. Bureaucratic and Collegiate Models

Bureaucratisation as a particular form of organisation is characterised by legal-rational authority, such authority being legitimated both by technical expertise and the office itself (Filley, House & Kerr, 1976). The concept of bureaucracy has been applied to universities by a number of scholars. Parsons and Platt (1973), for example, note that the traditional image of the internal structure of Western universities is one of dual elements: a bureaucratic administration and academic collegialism for which tenure and academic freedom are central.

As the dichotomy suggests, analyses of universities using the classic bureaucratic model have tended to focus on administrative structures rather than on academic enterprise—yet such analyses are helpful in assisting us to understand the interface between administrative and academic processes, the reasons why the bureaucratic

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structure has persisted in universities, and how academic enterprise continues despite the strictures of bureaucracy.

Interwoven with the bureaucratic structure is said to be a bureaucratic culture, implying that bureaucracy as a form of organisation promotes distinctive patterns of thought, behaviour and behavioural strategies (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). An alternative—not necessarily conflicting—view is that bureaucracy is a form of control contrastable with cultural control. The former occurs when domination is embedded in the organisational and social structure of the organisation. The latter is in evidence where managers attempt to create and manage the values of staff and the meaning work has for them. While both depictions of control assist our understanding of academic life, the concept of cultural control is arguably a more dynamic, complex and therefore enriching one.

The second analytical model used by organisational theorists to study universities is that of collegialism, which is said to imply:

- a process of shared decision-making by a collegial group in relation to academic matters;
- mutual support in upholding the academic integrity of members of the group; and,
- conservation of a realm of special knowledge and practice. (Harvey, 1995:p153)

Collegial governance can be viewed from two perspectives: traditional conservative and radical. The former is committed to the centrality of academic autonomy and a preservation of the ideals embodied in the definition of 'collegialism' presented above. The latter espouses the traditional notion of collegialism as an appropriate forum for academic decision-making but sees it also as isolationist, individualistic, defensive, wary of change, elitist, using implicit quality criteria and a mere information provider to students (Bergquist, 1992). Harvey (1995) terms the radical collegialist perspective 'new collegialism' and characterises it as involving networking, teamwork, responsiveness, innovation, empowerment, readiness to change, the facilitation of active learning by students and explicit quality criteria.

The two forms of collegialism seem to represent points at either end of a continuum. However, while many universities exhibit some elements of the traditional conservative form and an increasing number are embracing the new-collegiate philosophy, it is questionable whether any institution lies at an extreme point. The traditional collegiate model which depicts the university as a community of scholars, for example, provides an understanding of the way in which academics are thought to share decision-making on academic matters, offer mutual support and preserve bodies of specialised knowledge and skills. But, as Harman (1989:p30) argues, to assume ‘that universities work basically on value consensus is to be simplistic and miss the point’. While the collegiate ideal may have fairly represented the universities of long ago, the vast institutions of today may have rendered collegiality—at least in the traditional form—a myth and therefore the model as suspect for use in analysing universities.

Work arrangements in universities have also been depicted as unusually flat and loosely joined, with cells of specialisation operating side by side, located in departments, and loosely connected at the operating level. This is similar to Weick’s (1976:p3) concept of 'loose coupling', in which organisational sub-units are loosely coupled with each other while retaining their distinctiveness; loose coupling connotes 'impermanence, dissolvability and tacitness'. When applied to universities, the concept seems intuitively appealing given the appearance and occasional disappearance of disciplines and their organisational homes, departments. The internal structure of universities is one in which departmentalism is now deeply engrained (de Fossard, 1970; Goodlad, 1976); indeed, universities have been described as containers housing a large number of academic departments representing 'monads each as complete and self-sufficient as the other. Each monad sets its own objectives and implements them' (Lane, 1985:p246). The concept of loose coupling suggests a more flexible approach to decision-making than that envisaged under the more rigid bureaucratic and collegiate models and may thus be a closer approximation of social reality. Moreover, the weight of evidence suggests that the culture of one workplace within an organisation invariably differs from that of another, despite structural and functional similarities (Becher, 1981; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

3. Cultural Models

Universities have been analysed in diverse ways—typically in relation to their history, structure and function—both at a macro- and a micro-level. However, an argument can be put that the most appropriate framework for analysing life in universities, and more specifically in academic departments, is an *organisational culture* (OC) one. The concept of culture has been used in a variety of ways to inform us about life in organisations and that there are many viable modes of inquiry available to undertake an analysis of workplace culture.

The notion of culture is central to social anthropology, cultural anthropology and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences. Classic anthropological studies saw researchers enter small, unfamiliar, non-industrialised societies outside Western Europe and modern North America and spend long periods of time studying the dress, language, habits, customs, rituals, norms of behaviour, value and belief systems as well as other aspects of the inhabitants’ way of life (Jary & Jary, 1991).

The idea that an organisation could be conceptualised as a mini-society and analysed from a cultural viewpoint first emerged in the 1950s, gained importance in the late 1970s and became immensely popular in the 1980s (Schein, 1992). The trend towards understanding organisations in terms of their cultural dimensions had its beginnings in the achievements of Japanese management in the 1970s; American corporations wishing to emulate the success of Japanese corporations were keen to study patterns of behaviour in the latter (Ouchi, 1981).

Researchers have struggled to find appropriate working definitions of ‘culture’ (Robey & Azevedo, 1994). Beals *et al.* (1977) note that the first important definition in the social sense was provided by the anthropologist, Edward Tylor:

> "Culture…is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor, 1871:p1).

However, since then many different definitions of culture have been adopted by anthropologists and sociologists; these vary according to the different theoretical assumptions made by researchers about the nature of society and the way it is organised. As a consequence, there is no consensus in the literature on the specific meaning of culture. Overviews of the OC literature have been provided by a number of authors (see, for example, Ott, 1989). A common approach is to present a taxonomy of similar cultural concepts, cultural behaviours and so on, sometimes as a step towards the adoption of a fundamental theoretical framework. This approach is overly simplistic and suggests a level of classificatory precision that is not in accord with reality. A more recent overview of the research literature is provided by Alvesson and Berg (1992), who argue that the character of OC is such that it cannot be portrayed in a 'one dimensional taxonomy or well-established theoretical framework' (p.54); instead, they recommend a competing paradigms approach. Although many organisational analysts work within a single paradigm, some have attempted to work within both the functionalist and the interpretivist paradigms, as we shall see.

A review of the literature on the cultural analysis of universities shows that studies of Higher Education (HE) institutions from a strictly OC perspective were relatively scarce until some 25 years ago but are increasing in number; such studies have been mainly north-American. Early researchers undertook ethnographic or ethnologic studies of universities and colleges (see, for example, Pace, 1960) with the aim of identifying institutional cultures and assessing their impact on students. Such studies lost popularity in the 1970s: they provided limited descriptions only; the nature of student life changed; students became a less homogeneous group therefore culture could no longer be assumed to affect each student in the same way; it became increasingly difficult to measure the impact of culture in the light of other influences (Maassen, 1995).

3.1 Studies of academic life

An earlier work, by Wilson (1942), focused on the functioning of academics in their institutional setting and represented the beginning of inquiries into academic life. The 1950s saw the publication of several notable works on cultural aspects of academic life. A classic example is Caplow and McGee's (1958) research into the rituals and processes involved in making academic appointments and the message they convey about the goals and values of the appointing institutions. A further example is Gouldner's (1958) influential study of latent organisational roles in terms of three variables: loyalty to the organisation; commitment to professional skills and values; and reference group orientations. Few such studies were undertaken in the next decade. Exceptions were Parsons and Platt's (1968) exploration of the intellectual values of academics, and Perkin's (1969) inquiry into the nature, history and influences of American academics.

The 1970s saw increased interest in studying academic life from a cultural perspective. Clark's (1970) work on organisational saga and academic belief systems is one example of 'sound and well-founded academic research on understanding

culture' (Maassen, 1995:p9). A major work by Halsey and Trow (1971) examines the teaching-research orientations, beliefs and status of British academics, using data gathered over many years. There were several other important works in the seventies. Trow (1975) investigates attitudes of students and academics to a wide range of issues by means of an extensive attitudinal survey in America. Ladd and Lipset (1975) link political ideologies with the hard and soft sciences on the grounds that intellectual pursuits predispose academics to particular critical positions. Startup (1979) conducts a comprehensive analysis of the occupational role of British academics, searching for patterns in institutional work efforts.

The late 1970s heralded an explosion of writings in the area. Dill (1982a, 1982b), adopts a functionalist 'cultural cognitivism' and an interpretivist 'shared meanings' perspective, seeing universities as representing a symbolic context and as having distinctive cultures maintained through members' actions. Dill examines the various roles of academics and attempts to identify values relating to each of these roles and their ethical implications; however, he fails to develop his initial conceptualisation (Maassen, 1995).

Masland (1985), working within the functionalist paradigm, sees OC as both a form of unobtrusive control impacting on student life, curriculum and administration, and as providing 'stability and a sense of continuity to an ongoing social system' (p.167). Like Dill, Masland failed to extend his ideas in later writings. Drawing on Geertz's (1973) symbolic anthropology, Tierney (1988) defines culture in terms of symbols in developing a framework to diagnose culture in HE institutions. Tierney argues that the essential elements of culture can be studied by answering such questions as: How does the organisation define its environment? How do new members become socialised? However, the theoretical underpinnings of Tierney's work are unclear; moreover, his work is based on a single case study and is somewhat superficial in approach.

Australian researchers, Entrekin and Everett (1980; 1981) (see also Everett & Entrekin 1987, 1994), undertook surveys of the work-related attitudes of academics using a representative sample of Australian universities and colleges of advanced education, with a New Zealand university contrast. Their study represents a significant contribution although carrying the usual limitations associated with survey research. More recent works include those of Bergquist (1992), Clark (1995) and Smart, Kuh and Tierney (1997). Drawing on Malinowski's (1944) functionalism, Bergquist (1992) identifies four distinct cultures in American HE: collegial; managerial; developmental; and negotiating. Problems with Bergquist's work relate to the seeming arbitrariness of the cultures identified and his failure to specify the underlying theoretical assumptions.

One of the most influential authors of the eighties was Clark (1983, 1984a, 1984b, 1987a, 1987b), an American academic who has researched extensively and written prolifically on HE culture. His major contribution has been to develop a framework for analysing culture that is arguably both rigorous and intuitively appealing. In a comprehensive study of academic institutions, Clark (1983) observed that academics are organised in four discrete but interdependent ways: by institution; by discipline; by profession; and by national system of HE. Institution and discipline modes can be regarded as primary inasmuch as they have a strong and pervading influence on

academic life, with the discipline having the strongest. The academic community-at-large and the national system of HE are secondary modes of organisation as their influence, although evident, may be weaker or less direct. Each of the four modes or levels of organisation is represented by a different level of culture, reflected in the behaviour of academics. As Clark writes:

> "It is…inescapable that (academic) activities and outcomes, indeed the nature of knowledge itself, are conditioned by the orientations that academics absorb from their disciplines, universities and colleges, the academic profession overall, and even their national system at large." (Clark 1984a:p109)

4. Competing Paradigms

In the context of OC literature, the interpretive paradigm encompasses a variety of forms of social science research 'united by an emphasis for [researchers] to grasp—that is, to understand or interpret—actors' meanings' (Jary & Jary, 1991:p326). The paradigm rests on the belief that social reality is constructed; its aim is to understand and explain phenomena—Weber's (1922) *verstehen*—rather than to control, generalise and predict. The interpretive paradigm is particularly appropriate when the research aim is to understand the complexities of life in university departments by relying on academics' own accounts—in terms of description and explanation—of their social reality. It is acknowledged that such an approach, implying as it does a need to ascribe beliefs and cognitive states in order to describe action, may be problematic for many researchers.

Researchers have used both the interpretivist and functionalist paradigms in studying cultural phenomena in organisations. Schein (1992), for example, a prolific writer and researcher on OC, is a structural-functionalist with interpretivist leanings. The structural-functional classification of his work rests on his view that culture is something an organisation *has* and, thus, as something which can be manipulated intentionally or managed. Interpretivists, on the other hand, assume that culture is so deeply embedded in the psyche of a group that it cannot be altered systematically (Kuh & Witt, 1988). Schein's interpretivist leanings derive from the centrality of artifacts, norms, values and assumptions to his definition of organisational culture.

The question of whether commitment to the interpretive paradigm with recognition of the relevance of the functionalist paradigm implies the use of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches turns on the issue of whether the latter are viewed from a technical perspective or an epistemological perspective. From a technical perspective, they may be seen to represent two different groups of research methods, the choice of method(s) being determined largely by the nature of the research question(s) at hand rather than by the paradigm(s) within which a researcher is working. On this interpretation there is no logical impediment to combining the two types for a particular study (Bryman, 1988).

From an epistemological perspective, however, the quantitative and qualitative approaches themselves may be viewed as paradigms representing different world views and, therefore, as incompatible. The former is said to see the world as composed of variables, is concerned with hypothesis testing, is outcome-oriented, is reductionist and particularistic, adopts an outsider perspective, is deductive and

involves controlled measurement. The latter, on the other hand, seeks to understand human behaviour, is concerned with building theory grounded in reality, is process-oriented, is holistic and contextual, adopts an insider perspective, is inductive and involves naturalistic and uncontrolled measurement (Cook & Reichardt, 1979). On this view, allegiance to one paradigm rather than to another seems critical given their apparent incommensurability.

However, Cook and Reichardt (1979) argue that the characteristics outlined above are not as clearly traceable to the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms as is often suggested. Not all qualitative research procedures are holistic, while some qualitative researchers adopt an outsider perspective. The author of this essay tends to the view that the quantitative and qualitative approaches represent different research method types and that, by implication, a much stronger case can be made for using either or both methods, regardless of whether one is committed to the interpretive or to the functionalist paradigm.

5. Culture as Values and Beliefs

As we have seen, the OC literature is characterised by a diversity of definitions, perspectives and theories, all of which have been employed usefully at one time or another by researchers but each of which has its limitations. While acknowledging that the field of OC is still relatively theoretically immature, there is a need to adopt a theoretical perspective and a working definition of the concept of culture for the purpose of any research. In making the choice one needs to be mindful of Alvesson and Berg's advice, that:

> "…culture is as rich as life itself, and simply reducing it to a rigid framework or precise and absolute definitions would seriously reduce its inborn complexity." (Alvesson & Berg 1992:p48)

The choice of a perspective or perspectives is all-important. As Trow (1984:p132) observes, in relation to studies of HE from a structural viewpoint, '[l]ike all perspectives, it omits and distorts even as it illuminates'.

Use of a value-and-belief perspective can be justified on several grounds. First, the perspective does not imply rigid adherence by all cultural members to systems of values and beliefs but allows for deviations in the form of sub-cultures which may be wholly, partly or not at all compatible with the dominant culture (Ott, 1989). As Harman (1988:p50) notes, values and beliefs are not necessarily 'uniform, shared or endorsed by all members'; indeed, they may be conflicting.

Second, while many attempts at exploring cultural phenomena in organisations are conducted at a fairly superficial level, a value-and-belief approach can be used to penetrate deeper cultural dimensions of organisational life. Third, the perspective is capable of being applied consistently in exploring important themes emerging from primary and secondary data as well as the sources of academic culture specified—that of the host institution, the discipline and the academic community-at-large.

Fourth, if the cultural study undertaken has a focus on changes in workplace practices, this makes the value-and-belief perspective particularly relevant because:

> "…there is one aspect of culture which needs special attention when … change is being considered. That is the way that beliefs and values are structured (the belief system). This will assist us in understanding an organisation's receptivity to change." (Conway, 1985:p19)

The view that culture consists of values and beliefs rests on an important and widely-held proposition: namely, that in order to modify employee behaviour in a way desired by management it is both possible and necessary to change those underlying values and beliefs, although behaviour modification might be achieved by various other means such as organisational structures, technologies, rewards and sanctions. Culture is thus seen as being used by management as a mechanism for control.

6. Australian Research into Academic Culture

As we have noted, Clark (1983) argued that academic culture—which includes the work practices of academic staff—is influenced strongly by the culture of the relevant discipline and, to a lesser extent, the culture of the host university, the culture of the academic community at large, and the culture of the relevant national system of HE.

The framework developed by Clark (1983) has been endorsed and used by a number of researchers although such studies are still relatively few, particularly in Australia. Harman's (1988, 1989, 1990) study of academic life at the University of Melbourne represents an excellent example of the application of Clark's analytical framework, albeit in modified form. In the symbolic interactionist tradition of Goffman (1959), Becker (1970) and Mead (1934), Harman uses an ethnographic approach to analyse academic life across four disciplines: history; chemistry; mathematics; and psychology. However, while Harman's (1988) findings provide a rich source of data to assist in understanding academic life, her study is restricted to a single institution and does not include the accounting discipline. As Clark himself noted in 1983, comparative studies in HE, at least from a cultural perspective, are rare.

More recently, Bellamy (1999) used Clark's framework and a value-and-belief perspective in an ethnographic study of the culture of academic accounting departments in four universities, three in Australia and one in Britain. In doing so she modified the framework on the grounds that it was not fruitful to see national systems of HE as having their own distinctive cultures but, rather, as reflecting government policy agendas aimed at achieving particular outcomes in HE. Her findings demonstrate that culture is indeed discernible at three distinct levels (discipline, institution and academic community), with each level manifesting its own peculiar defining qualities and culture. The distinctiveness of her research lies in the revelation that (i) the cultural worlds inhabited by academic accountants in their occupational life differ from those of academics in other discipline areas, (ii) the disparities are accounted for by cultural differences at the level of discipline and home institution; and (iii) it is the cultural dimension that explains why the subject accountants have reacted in particular ways to enforced change. Bellamy's study also serves to confirm that Clark's (1983) analytical framework was and is a legitimate means of understanding culture. It not only gave structure to her cultural analysis but proved to be an effective means of handling the slippery concept of culture as well as being theoretically sound.

7. Summary and Conclusions

Organisational culture seems to offer considerable potential for exploring the academic world. The appropriateness of such a framework lies in its concern with the 'way of life' of a group or groups within and across organisations. It can be argued that such groups lend themselves to cultural studies because 'culture is observable; empirical descriptions can be provided of the ways in which the meanings, values, ideas and beliefs of social groups are articulated...' (Bates, 1987:p88). Culture is most visible as the characteristic behaviour of a group (Beals, Hoijer & Beals, 1977).

However, as Maassen (1995) notes, organisational culturalists have tended to examine only certain aspects of academic life; they have restricted their analyses to linkages between specific elements of OC and academic functioning. In doing so, they may well have overlooked other important influences on academic life. What is needed is a more holistic approach to analysing academic life from a cultural perspective. In Australia, such an approach has been adopted by only a handful of researchers.

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