**Studying culture in organizations: Not taking for granted the taken-for-granted**

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At the beginning of the 1980s the publication of several key books and special issues of journals in the field of organization and management studies heralded the arrival of a new field known today as ‘organizational culture’. For academics the concept of culture served as a vehicle to renew their interest in the symbolic dimensions of organizational life and processes of meaning-making in organizations (Yanow and Ybema 2009). For practitioners, it provided the promise of a most welcome toolkit for creating commitment in times of economic recession. However, after more than a decade of being a dominant management fashion, slowly scholarly and managerial interest in ‘culture’ started to wane, diminishing culture to a standard chapter in OT and OB textbooks. Recently, however, some scholars claim to be witnessing a renaissance of interest in culture and culture management (Weber and Dacin 2011). They claim that the characteristics of this ‘second wave’ of culture interest are different from the first in its attribution of agency to individuals and organizations and its increased attention to “public culture” and outside appearances (Weber and Dacin 2011: 287-8). Although we warmly welcome renewed interest and we see merit in analysing culture as strategically drawn on by organizational actors in their self-presentation to an outside audience, we also believe it is worth critically discussing this renewed interest by going back to the original inspiration for studying culture in organizations. We may lose some of culture’s strengths as a root metaphor in the second wave’s movement away from studying “internalized taken-for-granted beliefs” and “private culture”. Specifically, culture as a concept used to have the capacity to elicit interest in more implicit processes of meaning-making and covert power processes and backstage politics, as well as dedication to provide thickly described analyses of everyday organizational life.

In this chapter we first briefly revisit the earlier literature on organizational culture and culture management by offering a short historical overview. We then discuss the renewed interest in culture and compare its characteristics to the original interest. Nostalgically embracing the original ambitions of culture as a root metaphor then provides us with a viewpoint from which to critically assess the current interest in culture’s offsprings in organizational research as well as a foundation for offering an alternative. We claim that the zeal for providing layered interpretation and thick description typical of the original approach deserves to be revitalized in contemporary accounts of, and approaches to, cultural life in organizing. The movement in academic interest in culture and culture management from substance to image, from taken-for-granted beliefs to branding, deserves critical scrutiny. Rather than scratching the surfaces of public culture and actors’ strategies of self-presentation, we suggest that organizational research needs to focus on critically examining outward appearances, puncturing its myths by demasking its symbolic and staged qualities, and probing into the not-readily observable, the silent and silenced, backstage and off-stage worlds in the organizational dungeons, rekindling its fascination for what might be under the skin, beneath the surface, behind the scenes, and between the lines.

**Organizational culture: a brief history**

*The rise of organizational culture*

There is a case to be made that the concept of culture and culture management entered organization studies via Japan. The stagnation of the US economy in the mid-70s, the story goes, in combination with the unprecedented economic success of Japanese companies in the 1970s and 1980s fueled an explosive interest in culture among practitioners and management scholars (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Handel 2004; Parker, 2000). Japanese management was assumed to be built around a clever use of cultural factors. In this narrative, culture was thought to improve product and service quality, to increase worker loyalty and commitment, and to spur economic performance. ‘Strong’ cultures, the argument went, supported consensus across the organization, consistency between espoused values and actual behavior, and clarity of strategic goals.

Companies were suddenly not only sites for the manufacturing of goods and services. They were home to a host of myths, rituals, and stories that demonstrated and reinforced the core values of the organization. Strong organizational cultures were not only at the heart of employee commitment and organizational efficiency. More importantly, influential scholars argued (e.g., Deal and Kennedy, 1982), strong cultures could be designed and manipulated. Given the right tools, management could infuse emotions and values beneficial to the organization into the workforce. In management theory and practice, ‘culture’ no longer referred to the occasional painting on the wall in the company’s boardroom, but came to stand for organizational members’ presumed values and persistent practices, as well as management’s use of a ‘soft’ armantarium to change or control these.

Alongside the explosion in managerialist understandings of culture, organizational culture and symbolism also burst onto the academic scene of organizational studies in roughly the same period with the publication of several key books and special issues of journals (Barley, Meyer & Gash 1988). Rather than embracing culture as a tool of management, organizational scholars heralded culture as a new paradigm in organization studies. For them, the notion of culture constituted, not a ‘variable’ that could be measured and managed, but a ‘root metaphor’ for interpreting and analyzing organizations (Smircich 1983). It served as a vehicle to renew their interest in processes of meaning-making in organizations and subjective dimensions of organizational life (Yanow and Ybema 2011). Despite earlier symbol-sensitive studies of, for instance, bureaucracy in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Gouldner 1954), culture was being proclaimed as a ‘new’ way of seeing and understanding organizations. Enabled by the concept of culture (Martin and Frost, 2011) the tired tropes of systems and structures could be replaced with the study of ideational and symbolic aspects. Influenced by anthropology and symbolic interactionism (Barley and Kunda, 1992), these scholars sought a paradigm for organizational analysis that allowed them to study values, meanings, symbolism and emotions, topics that had thus far been largely neglected in organizational research.

*The fall of organizational culture*

For a short period of time around the end of the 1980s, cultural perspectives almost dominated management research. This is hardly the case today. Whatever happened? A telling clue can be found in an article by Calas & Smircich from 1987. The title itself is revealing: “Post-culture: Is the organizational culture literature dominant but dead?” Organizational culture did not fully live up to its promise as a new, paradigm-shifting metaphor in the field of organizational studies, because, as Calas & Smirchich point out, the culture-as-variable view was the predominant approach to culture during this time, crowding out of the culture-as-root metaphor. Notwithstanding some solid new work, objectivist and managerial ways of thinking thus showed to be persistent and, in a critical sense, organizational culture as a new concept proved to be intellectually dead.

If not intellectually dead, managerial interest in culture was also bound to die. It was clear from relatively early on that cultures were difficult to control and design from a management point of view, which ultimately undermined the culture perspective’s claim to be a practical tool for management. The fall of Japanese management styles further discredited this claim. While American business was perceived to be in crisis in the early eighties and Japanese management was understood as the difference between American stagnation and Japanese success, by the end of the 1980s, the roles had been reversed. American business was experiencing a revival, centered on Silicon Valley, and Japanese business was starting to stagnate; a stagnation that to some extent was blamed on the Japanese management style and the rigidity of ‘strong’ corporate cultures.

However, the most important explanation, perhaps, is that it became clear that most organizations do not develop strong and distinctive cultures at all. On the contrary, most organizational cultures were perceived to be generic and derivative (Martin et al. 1983). Scholarly work showed that culture in organizations was not necessarily a force that knit things together, but as much a force that was dynamic and potentially disintegrating, as organizations were themselves destabilized. Organizations were disrupted and downsized, and increasingly organized in more fluid patterns through outsourcing and offshoring.

This does not mean that organizations lack culture. It means that they are more like sites where different cultural elements, e.g. functional, occupational, national, and locally emerging cultures, intermingle. Culture researchers developed understandings that accounted for the fragmentation and fluidity by exploring, e.g., cultural ambiguities (Young 1989) and paradoxes (Ybema 1996), and the occurrence of subcultures (Van Maanen and Barley 1985) and countercultures (Martin & Siehl 1983). Such work contributed to an increasing awareness among practitioners of cultural processes being complicated which, for them, took the shine of ‘culture’ as a potentially uniting force in organizations and as a promising tool of management. The variable view on culture, or the view that cultures could be designed and engineered, became much more complicated, turning culture into an impractical instrument, since management now needed to engage with several culture variables, and not just one, some of which were outside its control, e.g. educational, professional, industrial and national cultures.

*A note of caution: a moderate fall*

Our narrative of organizational culture’s presumed fall from grace should not be over-interpreted. Organizational culture as a central concept may have retired to a standard chapter in organization studies textbooks, its legacy, whether the academics’ or the practitioners’ version, has certainly not vanished from the scene. In management practice, culture management is still a central part of many organizations’ agenda, albeit perhaps more implicitly. Values, understandings, beliefs, ideas and meanings are key elements of what corporate management and leadership address. The great interest in transformational leadership concerns itself with the management of meaning and emphasizes the cultural dimension more than conventional management and leadership which focused on behaviours and outcomes and the exchange relationship, thus caring less about values, emotions and other ideational elements. Many organizations actively cultivate the symbolic significance of shared meanings, a common history, a golden age, idiosyncratic founders and dramatic developments, which, they claim, make up a quite distinct organization with a unique or strongly guiding organizational culture. Often, the promotion of such a joint culture parallels, and aims to ‘supplement’ or bridge, internal variation.

Not only leadership practice is suffused with cultural themes. There is also continued interest in the role of culture in, for instance, international management and cross-cultural collaboration, as well as in processes of organizational change. Some focus on cultural change per se (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2008), while others acknowledge that change includes a strong cultural element or that culture filters, obstructs or revises the process (Canasi et al. 2013). So, despite organizational culture having become much the less the object of attention, inspiration and hope since the 1980’s and probably having become addressed in much more realistic ways, it is still an important theme in organizational practice.

In a similar vein, the academic interest in organizational culture or, more precisely, in organizational culture per se, also started to live a more retired life behind the scenes, but only after it inspired the emergence of a variety of new perspectives. Organizational scholars open to an interpretivist approach and sensitive to meaning-making processes sailed off in different directions, no longer studying ‘organizational culture’, focusing instead on, for instance, storytelling and discourse, institutions and institutional work, individual and collective identities, control and resistance, practices of strategizing, cultural change, crosscultural collaboration, socio-material dimensions of organizational life, leadership or sensemaking. Even though the rise and domination of approaches such as discourse, organizational identity and institutional theory have squeezed out serious attention to organizational culture, these fields are to some extent endebted to (without explicitly building on) the 1980s and 1990s studies of organizational culture. This may be explained by changes in fashion and, perhaps, by an apparent preference for easier-to-observe, more surface-focused phenomena at the expense of interpreting meanings, symbolism and taken for granted ideas associated with organizational culture studies (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011; Alvesson & Robertson 2015).

*Re-turn of organizational culture?*

Research into the cultural dimension has thus redirected attention away from studying organizational cultures per se and towards an interest in elements that are shaped by cultural processes. Throwing out a wide net (including, e.g., studies of ‘institutions’ and institutional work as studies of ‘culture’), Weber & Dacin (2011) speak of a second wave of cultural analysis. This wave, they maintain, is characterized by a move away from the idea of stable and shared cultural elements that operated as constraints on organizational activity. Instead, the second wave emphasizes the idea that culture might be a resource, or a repository of resources, for action, rather than a constraint. Relatedly, cultural analysis increasingly views cultural elements as constructs, as outcomes of construction processes, and not as givens, handed down over time by tradition. In this way culture has become more of a perspective on social reality, rather than the object of study. Key notions in the second wave of cultural analysis, according to Weber & Dacin (2011), are the cultural toolkit approach (Swidler 1986, Harrison & Corley 2011, Howard-Grenville et al. 2011, Kellogg 2011, Leonardi 2011, Rindova et al 2011) and organizational sensemaking (Weick 1992,1995). In the following sections, we want to sketch some of the central tenets of contemporary thinking about culture, building on Swidler’s ideas, and explain how these ideas relate to the field of identity studies.

**The culture toolkit and identity formation**

*Culture as toolkit*

Swidler’s framework assumes that there are not only different cultures, but also different ways to mobilize and use culture. She introduces the metaphor of a “tool kit”, or “repertoire” (Swidler 1986), to describe culture. This helps her to debunk the idea that culture is simply a “unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction” (Swidler 1986, p. 277). Individuals are assumed to possess a repertoire of diverse cultural resources that can be either tacit cultural elements such as attitudes and styles or explicit cultural material such as rituals and beliefs (Swidler 1986, p. 281). The tool kit represents the available cultural capabilities of a given person at a given time that can be used to construct strategies for actions. Culture is something that provides skills and capacities that can be exploited. People draw on their available set of cultural resources to put together, and shape, strategies of action when facing different types of situations. In short, the toolkit view understands culture as a way of engaging with and solving concrete and specific problems at hand.

As indicated above, Swidler suggest that this is accomplished through strategies of action. Strategies of actions depend on culture because culture provides and sustains the strategies of action that are possible to pursue. Over time, individuals may learn new, or refine existing, skills and capabilities through the culture they inhabit. The use of a set of particular cultured capabilities, and not others, constitutes the repertoire of strategies of action available for use.

The toolkit view recognizes that although culture influence action, it may not do that in a static and predictable way. Swidler highlights two main models for how culture may frame action, settled lives and unsettled lives. Within settled lives, cultural experiences reinforce, or refine, the skills, habits and attitudes of one’s repertoire at hand. Here actions and behaviors do not depend upon immediate cultural experiences. This means that strategies of actions does not compete with alternative models of arranging life experiences. The “undisputed authority of habit, normality and common sense” (Swidler 1986) are the guiding forces behind people’s behaviors. However, these forces do not provide commanding unique patterns or strategies of action by imposing cultured capabilities. They rather constrain action by providing a limited set of resources out of which individuals can construct strategies of action. As a consequence, when living the settled life people can live with major discrepancies and contradictions between what they claim, and how they act, as demonstrated by the sometimes striking differences between espoused values and values in use in organizational settings (Argyris & Schön 1995).

In unsettled periods, the strain of finding appropriate templates for action through existing culture lacking moves people to develop more overt and elaborate templates for strategies of action. Here Swidler borrows a page from Geertz (1973) and label these overt templates ideologies, who establishes new symbolic resources that facilitates the emergence of new strategies of actions. Ideology is a somewhat unfortunate choice of concept because of the many connotations attached. It has many uses and meanings in social science, with two dominant framings: a) it is used to refer to false beliefs covering up a dominant social order, and b) it is viewed more neutrally as a system of ideas and values (Freeden 2003, Hartley 1983). Ideology also offers avenues for decontestation (Freeden 2003) – making essentially contestable concepts less contentious. In this sense, ideology can be viewed as a device to cope with ambiguity and the indeterminacy of meaning. Ideology orders, patterns and suppress surplus meaning. Geertz (1973) distinguishes between an interest and a strain theory of ideology, where the interest theory uses the concept of ideology to explain a group’s search for power, while the strain view considers ideology as a means to reduce stress and anxiety due to lack of cultural resources (see also Kunda, 1992). Swidler adheres to the strain theory of ideology.

Because of the strain of lacking sufficient and readily available cultural resources, people are moved to align their life experiences with their cultural understanding. Thus, cultural resources, in the shape of ideologies, have more visible influence over action than in settled lives. The culture becomes more visible and consistent with values in use because this type of period is characterized by the development of new strategies of action due to the fact that actors are actively using and making sense of the cultural experiences they are encountering. The ideologies actors embrace have a strong direct influence on them. They provide them with new-symbolic resources that allow new strategies of action to compete with existing ones. People that find themselves in unsettled periods actively engage with their actions and behaviors to make them coherent with their beliefs.

*Identity work*

Organizational identity and identity work in organizations are perhaps the most frequently studied cultural resources and processes in organizational analysis. Arguably, identity regulation is the most studied way of engaging in ideology in Swidler’s sense: as a way of providing a template for strategies of action. Hence, research into organization culture has continued mostly due to an interest in how identities are shaped and played out in organizations, sometimes with explicit reference to organizational actors’ active deployment of culture as a resource to establish, maintain or alter an individual or collective identity (e.g., Ailon-Souday and Kunda 2003; Ybema and Byun 2011). Identity offers the possibility to continue probing the cultural dimension, but without having to assume that the organization is or has a culture.

Perhaps the most common way of understanding identity today is viewing it as a construction and as a performance that is constituted through linguistic acts and practices (Broms and Gahmberg 1983; Turner 1984; Butler 1987, Giddens 1991; Shotter 1993; Alvesson 1994; Somers 1994; Dunne 1996; Antaki and Widdicombe 1998, Gioia et al. 2000; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003; Collinson 2003; Alvesson et al. 2008; Ybema et al. 2009) – or to be more specific, focusing on the social and interactive co-construction and performance of a shared identity within a work community. All interactions potentially have identity effects, but more specific processes regulate actual impact. In this sense, identities are developed, maintained, and reconfigured through accounts and interactions. They may take on the form of narration – a more or less coherent story – or the form of conversation – a more interactive, and potentially disruptive form for the production of accounts about one’s self. Sometimes, narratives are salient in a conversation, sometimes the latter are less story-like. Life-events build into life-stories, build into identities – episode by episode – telling people who they are. Identities thus stem from people’s attempts to construct selves that accord with present circumstances and previous life-stories. From this perspective, social identities are knitted together through the various accounts people tell about the events and circumstances of their lives – informing others as well as themselves about who they are and, perhaps, equally importantly, about who they want to be(come).

The notion of identity as a construction has the advantage of offering a way of understanding how people preserve their sense of self without losing their capacity to act as they believe necessary according to particular circumstances. The same identity material can thus be crafted into different life stories, and can have a different impact on people’s social identity, depending on how it is related to other identity material. Since identity is an accomplishment, the way identity is accomplished is in itself an important question. In a sense, this means that the accomplishment – the identity produced – becomes less important to study. It is, rather, the ways and means people deploy in constructing their identities that becomes important. Such processes of identity work are not only more important but also more accessible to study than narratives as fixed texts or frozen states of subjectivity (identity as a set of traits).

Perhaps organizational actors’ present preoccupation with identity can be understood as their way of dealing with the increasingly unsettled – in Swidler’s sense – character of organizational life. Working life in contemporary organizations is frequently portrayed as unstable, ambiguous, and conflicted (Watson, 1994, Sennett 1998). Workers as well as managers frequently encounter ethical problems, stress, a sense of lack of meaning, and feelings of insufficiencies (Jackall, 1988; Sennett, 1998; Thomas & Linstead, 2002) – experiences that are often laden with the perceived threat of the risk for and effects of down-sizing (Scarbrough & Burrell, 1996; Watson, 1994). They are also frequently affected by ambiguous and contradictory expectations and demand, and exposed to incoherent organizational discourses – for example, they are targets for discourses on strategic leadership, while simultaneously responsible for carrying out standard operations procedures, and administrative and sometimes non-managerial work (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003).

**Culture management and identity regulation**

Organizations and organizational realities can be said to have become messier. They are more loosely structured, more difficult to control, and more prone to break down. As a result, alternate ways of exercising organizational control have emerged, including efforts that target occupational and organizational identities. Such attempts include corporate culture engineering, management seminars and feedback sessions, and other attempts to influence and regulate organizational members’ identities and sense of self (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

As in the field of organizational culture a large portion of management research into identity is motivated from an organizational control point of view. Management in general, and perhaps even more so in complex organizations, is partly about trying to control identity (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Identity becomes an anchoring point for management control and regulation. This is not the same thing as to claim that identity regulation and culture management always have impact. Most, if not all, empirical studies show how identity regulation and other forms of culture management can be complicated, creating unintended and complex social dynamics.

Kunda’s (1992) inspirational study on how strong cultures or ideologies, in Kunda’s vocabulary, may interfere with the development of a sense of self provides an instructive example. In Kunda’s study, the intense efforts to streamline the organizational membership role, and the scripts to identify with the role, increased the levels of ambiguity in a workplace already rife with ambiguity. On balance, Kunda’s study highlights the problem with high-intensity identity regulation through enforced ideology: on the one hand, this kind of identity regulation has some positive co-ordinating effects, on the other it also leads to cynical and opportunistic conduct that distorts and disrupts social relations. From a critical stance, it may undermine organizational members capacity to craft selves that are not colonized or co-opted by organizational ideology.

Kunda’s account is vivid and persuasive, but it is important to remember that most complex organizations do not engage in creating the kind of idiosyncratic and intense ideology at display in Kunda’s study. Complex organizations are more likely to exploit collective identities already at hand, rather than create them wholesale. Or they might not engage in identity regulation at all. Kunda & Ailon-Souday (2005) argue that there was a shift away from culture management and normative control during the decades after the heydays of the 1980s and early 1990s. They claim that a new managerial model – market rationality – closely aligned with downsizing, outsourcing and distributed work emerged in US industry and increasingly elsewhere during neo-liberalism’s ‘hegemonic’ phase , which undermined the interest in culture management of the 1980s and 1990s. Kunda & Ailon-Souday don’t mince words: “market rationalists seem to have little patience for culture, no matter how strong” (2005, p. 203).

Kunda & Ailon-Souday have a point, but the turn towards market-rationalism is perhaps better understood as a force that un-settles organizations and organizing, in Swidler’s sense, as argued above, than as a wholesale repudiation of culture management, normative control and identity regulation. Indeed, market ratonalism itself could be seen as a form of identity regulation as it sets forth an implicit identity template – that of the entrepreneur. The continued interest in identity in organizational analysis and the recent renaissance in the interest of cultural analysis and forms of culture management supports this interpretation. For example, recent research has revealed how branding initiatives can be used to stabilize and maintain a particular organizational identity that has become unsettled though corporate growth and expansion (Kärreman & Rylander 2008) and how elite claims (Alvesson & Robertson 2006, Thornborrow & Brown 2009), HRM practices (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007) and CSR initiatives (Costas & Kärreman 2013) can be mobilized for identity regulation.

*A return to culture management?*

More support for continued managerial interest in (new forms of) culture management and identity regulation can be found in the emergence of more critical studies. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) introduce the concept of neo-normative control. This type of culture management draws on the observation that corporations today are more likely to mobilize identity aspects already expressed by individuals, rather than to mould them wholesale for organization members, as suggested by normative control. In this sense, neo-normative control is about co-opting identities already in play, and to encourage organizational members to align their ‘authentic’ selves to corporate realities: “neo-normative control aims to enhance the enjoyment of the job via the freedom of identity and emotional expression surrounding the work performance rather than through it” (Fleming & Sturdy 2009:572)

Land & Taylor (2010) provide a vivid example of how neo-normative control may operate. Drawing on a case of a boutique brand for clothing associated with outdoor sports, they show how employee lifestyle is mobilized to articulate and specify the brand. Employees, who are all expected to embrace and participate in outdoor sports, are offered vouchers for “Too Nice to Work Day” which can be used to take a day off – although, as Land and Taylor point out, the subtext is that it is expected that the experience is shared on the company blog and in promotion materials. Narratives and anecdotes from employee’s own active lifestyle, retold from their own experiences of canoeing or surfing, are extensively used in promotion materials. To prove the edge of the brand, the firm, for example, playfully charts one employee’s sick leave days and correlates it with height of surf in one catalogue feature, on one hand emphasizing that life is more important than work, on the other hand using life as an example of what work is about at the firm, implying that life is work and vice versa. Although the company comes off as alternative and accommodating to employee’s needs and wants, Land & Taylor show that this is a two way street, where the employee’s lifestyles are mined for providing brand meaning and value. In this sense, “branding functions as a form of identity management that extends beyond the workplace to govern the performance of labour – understood as value productive activity – in work and life. (Land & Taylor, 2010:408)

Fleming (2013) and Fleming & Cederström (2014) push the idea of neo-normative control in even bleaker directions. Fleming & Cederström speak about the boss-function, which explains how decentralized and flexible work schemes, with ‘flat’ hierarchies and no formal supervisor, are nonetheless directed and governed by managerialist preconceptions: “…hierarchies of regulation have been horizontalized. Most of us still have a boss above us giving orders. But we have also partially internalized this ‘boss function’. Whereas under Fordism workers could mentally tell the boss to ‘fuck off’ as they left the factory, now they take it home with them. Turning-off is no longer an available option” (Fleming & Cederström 2014:13).

Fleming (2013) fleshes out the development toward co-opting the life, rather than the behavior or the norms, of the organization member by drawing on the notion of biocracy. Under biocracy, the member’s subjectivity, non-work activities, private time and unpaid labour is put to work. The members’ subjectivity is put to work by recruiting and selecting individuals that volunteer to sub-ordinate themselves to the corporate logic. This can be observed for example in how management consultancy firms and law firms explicitly tell recruitment prospects that they are expected to work very long hours as junior consultants and associates, and only hire individuals that willingly accept this condition; and in how these firms exploit the socialization provided by higher education to facilitate co-ordination and control. Non-work activities are co-opted according to the logic described in the Land & Taylor (2009) vignette above. Private time is put to work through more and less systematic blurring of the lines between work and life, often pushed through well-intended work schemes such as telecommuting and flex-time, which shifts the responsibility to do the blurring to the individuals themselves. Unpaid labour, finally, has made its mark in the increasingly commercialized use of crowd-sourcing, open software and social media. Here work is harvested through enabling users, consumers and hobbyists to provide ‘content’, develop code and produce data points that are monetized by commercial behemoths such as Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple, to only mention a few.

Neo-normative control, the boss function and biocracy are useful additions to the organization analysis toolbox, but they clearly build and extend rather than substitute for more established understandings of culture management. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) are explicit about this and claim that neo-normative control is more of an extension of normative control than a replacement. They also emphasize that neo-normative control is likely to operate in hybrid arrangements that interface and align to other complementary forms of control (c.f. Alvesson & Kärreman 2003, Kärreman & Alvesson 2004).

*Grandiosity and organizational cultures*

A standard tool in the culture management toolkit tends to be the inclination to boost the organization’s reputation and to polish up its outward appearance to make it look good to an outside world of clients, competitors, controllers, etc., as well as to create a strong ‘brand’ for employees’ orientation and identification. Again, we see organizational culture then being used as a symbolic resource for managers, communicators, and marketeers to make claims of being unique, excellent and superior. Modern society, business and organizations are characterized by grandiose self-personifications and claims on a large scale. One could argue that we live an organizational ‘mega-culture’ of grandiosity. There is a strong desire to be labelled in the most attractive and pretentious terms. This applies to individuals, occupations, organizations, and various elites. A problem is that the struggle for the most coveted sugar plums—high professional status, conspicuous consumption, ‘world-class education’, ‘excellence’, and so on—involves a zero-sum contest. This means that a benefit for a specific individual or group is gained at the expense of another. Not everybody can be excellent or afford high-status goods or get a degree from a high-status university or being the leader in a field. Superiority calls for inferiority, so the competiton not be above others are fierce. Grandiose projects occupy an ever-increasing proportion of the time, commitments, and resources of various elite groups, such as politicians, media people, corporate executives, union leaders, and other representatives of organizations and professional groups. But also the lives of common people increasingly circle around grandiosity. There is a strong emphasis on illusionary tricks to back this up: CV improvement, title and grade inflation, organizations exhibiting impressive window-dressing through policy formulation and executive development programmes, and occupations re-launched as professions

Grandiosity means attempts to give yourself, your occupational group/organization, or even the society in which you live a positive—if somewhat superficial—well-polished and status-enhancing image. As much as possible is fused with positive labels and meanings. Many organizational elements are targeted for symbolic upgrading. They are made remarkable and impressive, adding to status and self-esteem. Issues of substance (practices or tangible results) are marginalized. Representations that privilege sounding good are preferred to possibly more precise and insightful descriptions.

In other words, grandiosity does not necessarily mean delusions of grandeur or something that is obviously mad. It does not primarily illuminate the obsession of CEOs and other business people suffering from hybris, active in the construction of monuments to commemorate themselves, or in the recognition of the value of major achievements, such as the Nobel Prize or Olympic championships or impressive corporate achievements. Contemporary grandiosity—at least in open, relatively equality-oriented societies and organizations—is socially controlled, semi-realistic, and confined to loading an increasing number of phenomena with strongly positive, exaggerated meaning that generate attractiveness, success, and distance from the paltriness and mediocrity of everyday life. Grandiosity is being democratized. Everybody wants it and feels entitled to it. It is typically camouflaged and represented as a favourable, but not obviously misleading representation of a phenomenon. Grandiosity gilds the lily by lending a golden haze to various phenomena. Since this involves considerable doctoring of a world that is not always beautiful, it also involves the application of smokescreens. Grandiosity is linked with an increasingly widespread ‘narcissism’ and a desire to enhance self-esteem. We want to be in the public eye, confirmed, associated with something prestigious, and to distance ourselves from what is trivial. The desire to be fascinating is not just an individual, but also very much a collective phenomenon. It applies to various institutions and groups that acquire labels to provide a boost in terms of meaning, sophistication, and status. Let us give some examples of this phenomenon.

Most Western (and some others) societies have rapidly moved from being seen as industry- and service- oriented to one of information (during the 1970s) and, in the absence of more rapid upgrading, has wound up being identified as a ‘knowledge’ society. A similar, perhaps even more grandiose idea is the one of the rise and domination of ‘the creative class’ and ‘the creative economy’ (Florida, 2001). All this sounds great and is very popular to communicate. Thompson et al. (2000: 122) write: ‘Policy-makers and academics alike . . . endlessly repeat the mantra that knowledge work offers a rationale for the development of capital in the workplace, a blueprint for the creation of “world class” firms, and a way of preventing advanced economies restructuring away their sunset industries from becoming peripheral low-wage, low skill national economies’.

In working life, bureaucracy and mass production have had to make way for so-called knowledge-intensive companies, dynamic networks, and flexible, customer-steered operations. And people are employed for ‘value creation processes’ rather than for the production of goods and services. Managers and supervisors are increasingly labelled as ‘leaders’. Strategic visions and empowerment have pushed aside organizational management of a more conventional, more boring, nature. In the universities a sluggish collegial spirit has been surplanted by academic leadership. Organizations are supposed to work with creativity, competence and innovation, not mainly hard work, reliability and product modification. Personnel adminstration has been replaced by HRM and ‘talent management’. More and more work is supposed to be ‘strategic’: HRM, communication, marketing, branding, purchasing, etc. Many studies on strategy in practice seems to be upbeated versions of managerial work (Blom & Alvesson 2015).

There is considerable inflation of job titles: more and more people have become ‘managers’ and ‘executives’, and it is not particularly exclusive to have ‘vice president’ on your business card these days.

And this is not exclusive to individual titles. Groups have become teams, and when senior managers meet they become ‘executive teams’. Rationalization is now termed ‘business process engineering’. Plans have become ‘strat-egies’. Management training now takes the form of ‘executive development programmes’. Giving advice is referred to as ‘coaching’, which has become a booming industry, supposedly helping a world in increasing need of expert advice. Expressions like ‘world class’ and ‘excellence’ are increasingly used, often without much backup in terms of demonstrated qualities or accomplishments.

Institutional theory claims that most organizations nonetheless adopt such ideas and recipes, at least at the formal structural level. They introduce, for example, techniques, practices, and structures, establish new departments, initiate projects, and programmes and employ certain terms. Such actions are implemented not because they have a proven positive effect on operations but in order to reduce cognitive uncertainty and/or to establish legitimacy. People might, for example, be uncertain about what should be done. Is it essential to have a budget? Would quality circles lead to improvements? Is it a good idea to employ consultants? Would gender equality perhaps result in better managerial recruitment? It is not easy to disperse uncertainty. In the absence of self-confidence, time to think, and critical reflection, people tend to imitate others.

One advantage of doing what others do is that you gain legitimacy. If you do not have a gender equality policy, a training programme for ‘leaders’, strategic plans and visions, you may on the contrary appear to be out-of-date, irresponsible, sloppy, or unprofessional in some other respect. As a result, in order to avoid this and give the impression you are rational, ethical, up-to-date, or simply like everyone else, you adopt various well-established and new ideas and recipes, even though it is difficult to demonstrate any gains in efficiency or any other substantial advantages. All these tend increasingly be not just about adaptation to myths/external expectations or being as everyone else, but often lead to strong claims of scoring high in terms of appearing impressive and ahead of everybody else. Legitimacy is then being supplemented and often replaced by grandiosity. Visions, values and branding aims to signal superiority.

As we have seen, an exaggerated interest in change—or at least the initiation of more or less well-considered projects—is closely linked to a high degree of sensitivity for what people think others are doing. Appearing dynamic and progressive in a fantastic world, full of turbulance and pressure to be adaptive and on top of things. As there are frequent mass media reports about the strong need for change and organizations are often engaged in various change activities, it is vital to keep up—both with the general norm and with the signalled moves of others. The risk of deviating and, in particular, falling behind is a major motive force. A key factor here is the surface—what seems to be visible from a distance and without much deeper knowledge—in an organizational and management context. This chapter focuses on the links between these aspects, in which imitations and fashions have a particularly high impact at the shop-window level (i.e., the illusion level), and where an increasing emphasis on the shop-window factor encourages imitations and fashion-following behaviour.

Isomorphism largely takes place at a superficial level, even though it can go deeper. Plans and models that attract the attention of managers can often be interpreted and applied in different ways. Hence organizations with similar formal structures and/or using certain labels to display what they are or do often turn out to be quite different in practice. For example, local dynamics, traditions, and ways of working are important and can rarely be imitated. Thus, outsiders find it hard to understand the deeper insights obtained from long-term participation that are required for adopting specific ways of operating. As a result, these modes of operation are difficult to copy. Hence, companies imitate and develop what they believe are particularly advanced structures, as described by the media, but which actually only bear a superficial resemblance. Genuine, ‘in-depth’ imitation is another matter, and more difficult (Rövik, 2011). Although many organizations have CSR in the form of a policy and certain activities, and hence appear to be similar, considerable variation exists at the practical level, i.e., to the extent that anything at all goes on there. Sometimes, they only have the label in common, and certain buzzwords in their policy documents.

Overall, there is an expansion of operations involving ‘the corporate beauty industry’. An aesthetic and decorative surface—architecture, premises, letterhead design, elegant brochures, posters, PowerPoint presentations, company uniforms, beautiful and attractive employees, etc.—are becoming increasingly important (Hancock, 2003). This applies to both physical and verbal symbolism.

As beauty is something relative, the more aesthetically appealing competitors or colleagues become, the more ugly a company may discover itself to be (in the eyes of others or in its own). This aesthetization affects organizational cultures in a variety of ways. One extreme is a low ‘culture effect’, surface is viewed as surface. There is a disconnect between impression management and cultural orientations guiding understandings and actions in ‘normal’, operative work. This is sometimes what culture as resource authors have in mind, emphasizing the instrumental use of cultural resources, addressed above.

This overall cultural trend towards grandiosity affects organizations in different ways. Some – small, manufactoring or routine service oriented – probably are affected less. Large organizations working with complicated products or intangible services are probably affected much more. But also here there is large variation. Parts of organizations may work very much influenced by grandiosity fantasies and ambitions. Branding people try to frame their work in line with highly symbolic, successful brands. HRM people dream about working with strategies and being the left hand and speaking partner of the CEO. Senior people often live in the idealized, clean world of discourse: plans, powerpoint presentation and persuasive talk are key elements of their workplace reality. All these live to a considerable degree in grandiosity-fused cultures, although the inevitable imperfections of corporate life also put their imprints. So grandiosity meanings compete with other elements. Many people in organizations we have studied fluctuate between rather different meanings. Branding is fusing products and consumers with a higher purpose, creating value – and struggling for name recognition and supporting sales and market shares through fighting for space in shops and offering discount prices. HRM is about developing human capital, increasing competence and creating cultures of excellence – but mainly a lot of routine service work and administration. Leadership is about developing people and creating committed, loyal employees seeing the higher purpose through vision – but sitting in meetings, listening to other managers and doing administration and operative work making the organizational machinary function is a more significant experience. Cultures are then in variety of ways characterized by the ideals, representations, experiences and fantasies that people develop and communicate in various work groups and organizational units. Positive meaning and uplifted identities are created – but also confusion, cynicism and depression. Or a mix of these, often with a strong element of ambiguity – a key quality in many contemporary organizations (Alvesson 2013a; Martin 2002; Martin & Meyerson 1988).

Let us illustrate this trend towards investment in attractive superficial structures by discussing a case where there is a clear signal value to the outside as well as to junior employees but with an ambigious, even negative, connection with ‘core’ operations.

*An illustration: The business concept of an IT consultancy firm*

The business concept of a corporation may be seen as a cultural phenomenon – a symbol summarizing certain shared meanings. The business concept is supposed to provide an overall indication of what the company does and summarize its core competence and market offerings (Normann, 1977). The IT consultancy firm studied by Alvesson (2000) promised a combination of strategic and IT expertise (i.e., management). IT issues were put in a wider, business-oriented perspective and, it was claimed, involved much more than programming. Many managers and employees proudly referred to the company’s business concept and considered that the company’s strength was precisely a combination of management and IT skills. Strategy and management gave an attractive picture of operations, compared to being ‘only’ into programming. It was a source of pride and community. Many managers and other employees emhasized the progressive and sophisticated nature of the firm, their ability to create close contacts with client top management, work with communication and getting the assignements ‘right’ also in a business sense. People claimed that the business concept guided their work.

However, the extent to which people complied with this was highly doubtful. The relationship between the ideal and guidelines for thinking about themselves and the firm on the one hand, and the specific operations where ambiguous. This was to some extent dealt with through broad meanings of ‘strategy’, ‘business’ and ‘management’ (‘project management is also management’), but also through pointing at the future and developments. The business concept alternated between being realized and the principle and an ambition and hope. So the business concept worked as a key symbol and had an integrating and uplifting function. But its the selective and status-enchancing way of representing the firm and its people meant that it illustrate grandiosity as defined above. This is to some extent camoflaged and buried under ambiguity of meanings when we did the study in ‘real time’, but comes out much more clearly when doing a number of follow-up interviews with people asked to comment retrospectively about the firm.

This is how one subsidiary manager expressed himself in an interview a few years later after he had left the company:

‘This is often the way it goes with companies in this industry, it is one thing to profile yourself, but matching the profile is something else.’

Another former subsidiary manager put it more crudely:

‘What we live off in the consultancy world is actually resources and volume. We depend on sales and the middle level, not the brilliant analysts out front. System analysts and programmers are what counts. And that’s what we lived off. We packaged and disguised that we were working in projects at Datakonsultus, but we rarely needed to take any major project risks. It was on cost-plus basis, and a packaging of volume consulting. But that’s not the way they worked in England (i.e., at the British subsidiary). They believed in “now the new view of management and IT is on the way”, and we talked about this in Sweden but didn’t do very much about it, but they believed in it wholeheartedly, and everything went to pot. [laughs] Volume was what it was all about! That’s bulk! What we were good at was IT, that’s the whole story, and that’s what we earned money on too.’

The interviewee referred to the business concept as a sales trick and a myth, and said that the business concept was rarely mentioned in discussions among senior managers.

‘We didn’t have that kind of competence. It was a cleverly dreamed-up and skilfully maintained myth, I might say, rather meanly. But I think it is true too.’

But nonetheless I wouldn’t say it was wrong because that myth held up all through the 1980s. [laughs] And that’s not a bad rating at all. If people thought we were good at combining management and IT—fine. And they were happy with that, worked on their projects and made money out of programming, because that was what it was all about, really.’

The impression, based on two rounds of interviews with the company’s managers and others, during and some years after the phase in which the myth was fostered so strongly, was that the mixture of naïvety and cynicism was crucial. Doubts and uncertainty often evaporate in an atmosphere of enthusiasm, wishful thinking, and rationalization pressures. Naïve faith is sometimes an asset (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). At the same time, some degree of business thinking and clear-sightedness is required if the grandiose aspects are not to be taken too seriously. Ambivalence and oscillation between naïve faith in the gilt-edged and an instrumental and pragmatic approach seem to characterize many of the participants. There is a mixture or smooth alternation, on the one hand, between a somewhat naïve view of future expectations and attempts to allow practices to be interpreted and depicted in ‘myth-friendly’ terms and, on the other hand, more strategic, even cynical thinking about what is involved and pragmatic behaviour, paired with sales and morale-enhancing talk that makes people happy. These somewhat complex meanings indicate the workings of organizational culture and culture management in an age of grandiosity. Genuine beliefs and values – held also by managers, but often with some ambivalance and caution – overlaps with a managerial-instrumental interest in creating a favourable image, thereby impressing clients and making the employees feeling more commited to a firm with, it was claimed, an impressive business concept and a clear identity.

**Immersion, de-familiarization and problematization**

The contemporary interest in (neo-)normative control, organizational identity and discourse as well as the turn to a culture-as-toolkit view (emphasizing cultural resources forming elements in constraining but primarily facilitating certain types of action) is quite diverse, but all tend to have a focus on the agentic use of culture. This captures important aspects of management and control and is thus valuable. It also means an avoidance of ambitious ethnographic work that aims to dig into the taken-for-granted, implicit and fine-grained layers of meanings making up organizational life-worlds. Given the importance of frontstage presentation in, and the instability and non-homogenous nature of many contemporary organizations, this may appear as reasonable. Yet, perhaps the tendency to shy away from layered interpretation and thick description in the research practice of organizational scholars is another manifestation of the increasing preoccupation in Western societies with outward appearances at the expense of substance. As indicated earlier, some of the key advantages of a cultural approach to the understanding of organizations are here at risk of being lost: the interest in illuminating the taken-for-grantedness of corporate reality and working life. What is ‘behind’ or what are the ‘deeper’ or non-explicit workings of discourse, identity claims, and other forms of (neo-)normative control – where the possible constitutive effects may be less about spoken or written words and more about unspoken scripts and implicit acts and the cultural context in which they are played out.

A related theme concerns the focus of attention. Management and organization is about much more than explicit action, use of discourse, the instrumental employment of cultural objects and resources and other ‘attention-attracting’ features. The domains and aspects of the not so obvious are significant and worthy of attention and ‘in-depth’ exploration. This calls for ‘thick description’, serious efforts to learn about and describe (or portray) layers of meaning difficult to verbalize in straightforward ways, e.g. on gender, age, authority, community, obligations, values, selfhood, work, competence, politics etc. Some of the better cultural studies score high in this regard. Exemplary here is Jackall (1988), who explores the cultural understandings of morality and politics in corporate life, an extraordinary rich and insightful study.

This type of cultural study is quite independent of the possibility and existence of stable, homogeneous and integrated organizational cultures being targeted for culture management. The use of a cultural theoretical perspective and the ambition to do thick description is not in any way dependent on organizational cultures as fixed objects. Organizations represent a wealth of cultural phenomena important to be unpacked also – and perhaps in particular – regardless of what is being aired in organizational discourse. We may study such phenomena in the absence of corporate actors who engage in attempts to manage, engineer, change, resist or market these phenomena. In fact, what is most interesting for scholars doing in-depth cultural research may lie well outside organizational actors’ conscious deliberations and agentic reach. As Alvesson & Sveningsson (2008) show in an in-depth study following a ‘cultural change’ programme at close range (longitudual observations and interviews with actors across organizational levels and subsites), what was targeted for cultural change did not affect or reflect any of the taken-for-granted understandings that actually framed interpretations and guided (in-)action. Such cultural analyses thus bring into view what is otherwise overlooked, ignored, uncritically accepted or silently assumed.

We suggest that the lack of layered interpretations in culture research can, at least partially, be remedied with immersive study, defamiliarization and radical problematization. We understand i*mmersive study* as open-ended ethnography which involves drawing close to subjects and situations and allows to thickly describe the various layers of meaning of the topic under study (Ybema, Yanow et al. 2009). The idea with immersive study is to break away from the standard idea that an organization, group or phenomenon necessarily constitutes a bounded and stable phenomenon. Rather, the point is to treat such phenomena as an entry point and then follow the flow, so to speak (van Hulst, Ybema and Yanow, forthcoming). As pointed out above, there are good reasons to at least consider the idea that organizations and work life arrangements have been destabilized. However, it is unlikely that meanings and understandings have been eliminated or completely destabilized. They are likely to operate in a different manner and under different forms of stability. The issue here is to relax a priori understandings about what constitutes a ‘culture’ (a profession, an organization, a community) and look for emergent meanings and patterns. It is not only about ‘following the animal’ but also about deciding which animals are present and who to follow. Key here is to be particularly sensitive to breakdowns in understanding and mysteries (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011). Immersive study is similar to ethnomethodology in the sense that it focuses on local practice. It is different from ethnomethodology in drawing more strongly on the cultural conceptual apparatus: meanings, rituals and understandings.

While immersion elicits knowledge ‘from within’, it also blinds the researcher’s eye to alternative viewpoints stemming from outsider positions which may generate equally interesting insight (Ybema and Kamsteeg 2009). Alongside ‘closeness’ to the field, social, emotional and analytical detachment is thus equally important. A key rationale for organizational culture studies, in particular those with a critical edge, is thus the ability to contribute to *de-familarization*, e.g. turning the seemingly well-known, natural, reasonable and familiar into remarkable phenomena, and encouraging rethinking and reflection (Alvesson & Deetz 2000). Part of the problem is that over-familiarity is rarely viewed as a problem in anthropology, apart from the routine advise to ‘not go native’. The main methodological issue here is, however, not just ‘making the familiar strange’, but rather the opposite, making ‘the strange familiar (Van Maanen, 1995: 20). The ethnographic toolkit is rather empty when it comes to questioning the familiar. Key elements of defamiliarization are to highlight what is strange, odd and weird about the reality at hand (Ybema and Kamsteeg 2009). For example, when studying higher education, there migt be more mileage in viewing universities as training camps for the administered society, or parking places for hedonistic expression, rather than semi-sacred places for learning. Or, when studying modern work places, to view them as places for idle and pointless activities (Paulsen 2014), rather than spaces for production of products, services and modern beings.

Finally, *radical problematization* highlights that although it is important to uncover meanings and understandings a truly critical project also needs to critically assess and question meanings and understanding. There needs to be an element of wonderment and doubt about meanings and understanding at use – in Habermas’ terms, an engagement in the hermeneutics of suspicion. What are the key assumptions and ideas that underlie meanings, understandings and cultural toolkits? What are the root metaphors? How does it connect to access to resources and other froms of power? Who benefits?

Utlimately, a radical problematization leads to a systematic questioning of dominant patterns of meaning and how it relates to social stratification and the mobilization and exercise of power. However, the point here is not to provide critique only. In radical problematization critique is not an end in itself; it is a means through which researchers come to a re-imagining of the cultural order. The point is not to develop blueprints for radical social change, but rather to point to entry points for the discussion and development of socially progressive ideas. Radical problematization is not about fantasising about the revolution, it is about probing the weak spots in spaces marked by hegemonic practices and social domination. It is a search for the crack in the system, where the light comes in.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we argued that, with the waning of interest in ‘organizational culture’, the research ambition to puncture surface symbolism and to critically probe the taken-for-granted layers of organizational life also seems to have gone out of vogue. The baby got washed away with the bathwater as research attention shifted towards outside appearances and agentic display of culture. This is why this chapter has argued for research that explicitly aims to move beyond or behind surface appearances, to explore the minutiae of silent, less-visible, overlooked, neglected or silenced realities, and to thickly describe the “layeredness” of organizational life. To remedy the paucity of layered interpretation in cultural research we suggested to draw on three strategies, objectives or ideals for doing cultural research: drawing close and immersion; defamiliarization and lending strangeness; and critical questioning and problematization. These seem to hold an important promise for invigorating culture research in the field of organization and management studies as they allow to ground understanding in both intimate familiarity with, and detached and critical analysis of, processes of meaning-making in organizational settings.

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