

## People and organisations (UMOCQW-15-M) – Component A

The concept of organisational culture emerged primarily in the 1980s, offering a different way of understanding organisations (Linstead, Fulop and Lilley, 2009). This interest found its roots in a declining socio-economic situation for American companies (Grey, 2009), and in the intellectual and theoretical development in organisations studies (Linstead, Fulop and Lilley, 2009; Brown, 1998; Smircich, 1983). Our exploration of organisational culture will firstly define this concept then analyse the rationalistic, functionalist and symbolist (Schultz, 1995) theories explaining how the concept affects our understanding of organisations. The University of the West of England (UWE) (see Appendix 1) will be used to illustrate this essay.

In the 1980s organisational culture was perceived as a way of improving an organisation's performance. One particular perspective considers culture as a management tool, or as Smircich (1983, p.339) says a 'critical variable'. Schwartz and Davis (1981, p.32) define culture as:

a pattern of beliefs and expectations shared by organization's members. These beliefs and expectations produce norms that powerfully shape the behavior of individuals and groups in the organization.

They consider that an organisation is defined by; 'structure, systems, people, and culture' and that these elements should support the organisation strategy (p.32). Their model considers that culture and strategy should fit together. The beliefs becoming norms were created by managers forming a strong culture that can represent a risk when facing changes. They therefore suggest a 'cultural risk assessment' through questionnaires (p.47). One can relate this approach to UWE. The context in which English universities are evolving has increased

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financial risks, highlighted in the UWE revised strategy (UWE, 2011a). Should UWE have assessed the cultural risk of this shift? Can culture be measured?

Firstly, Schein (2009, p.79) argues that a culture cannot be measured through questionnaires as it might only measure 'superficial characteristics of the culture'. Secondly, culture is seen as constructed through past decisions made by managers (Schwartz and Davis, 1981), and questions are designed by managers. Are they measuring culture or employees' compliance to the latter? Another criticism lies in the relationship between 'distinctive culture' and successful organisations, defined as keeping a leading position in the market (Schwartz and Davis, 1981, p.47).

This is a rationalistic approach to organisations (Schultz, 1995) in which culture is an element that can be identified and managed. Smircich (1983, p.347) argues organisational culture is more than that; proposing the idea of a 'root metaphor' where 'culture is something an organisation is'.

A model that has gained a strong interest with academics is that of Schein (Cunliffe, 2009). He argues that an organisational culture develops over the organisation's history. The past solutions to external and internal issues that have allowed the organisations to survive need to be taught to new members (Schein, 1990). This model, argues Shultz (1995, p.15), is linked to functionalism, the perception of 'organizations as natural systems, which primarily pursue organizational survival by carrying out necessary functions'. He considers that there are three levels of culture: Artefacts, espoused values and basic assumptions (Schein, 2009). Artefacts, such as an organisation's logo are the most visible (Brown, 1998). The second level contains strategic and policy documents. In the third level lie the basic

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assumptions, 'the taken-for-granted, underlying and usually unconscious assumptions' (Schein, 1990, p.111). The UWE logo 'U+WE' is an artefact implying a relationship between two groups, one of them being UWE. We could link this artefact to the UWE Strategy, based on partnerships (UWE, 2011b). Although we have illustrated Schein's point through simple examples from UWE, measuring an organisation culture is a complex task, requiring exploration of all levels of culture and their relationships (Schein, 2009).

Several criticisms can be made here. Both models define culture through the perspective of a small group of managers (Schwartz and Davis, 1981) and leaders (Schein, 1991). Although they all acknowledge the presence of subcultures in an organisation, they do not explain the role of the other members. Organisational culture could be seen as way of shaping members' behaviour (Grey, 2009).

Schein (1990) argues that new members need to be taught about the organisation culture. Do they all understand the culture in the same way or do they interpret the symbols of that culture?

This leads us to our final model which focuses on the experience of individuals when confronting the symbols of organisation culture. To define a symbol: 'A symbol is anything used to represent something more than itself' (Anon., 2000, p.245). Symbols can have various forms (objects, events), and provide meanings (Brown, 1998). An organisation is composed of individuals that will interpret and attribute meanings to their organisational life (Schultz, 1995). Thus a symbolic approach to culture would attempt to understand 'how individuals interpret and understand their experience and how these interpretations and understandings relate to action' (Smircich, 1983, p.351).

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To illustrate; we mention the strong partnership ethos of UWE and its U+WE logo. This could be interpreted as a management view that the organisation might want to impose on its members or partners. UWE Partnership University webpage shows a photo with four individuals at the front, smiling and dressed in suits. The photo could illustrate the partnership around the Bloodhound project (UWE, 2011a). Showing only white, middle age males could be interpreted as a symbol of a male-dominated organisation. If this experience is shared by more than one individual, and that first impression is followed by other similar experiences this will constitute a 'pattern of symbolic discourse' (Smircich, 1983, p.350). For this group, organisational culture will have a different meaning.

To conclude, Smircich (1983) argues that interpreting organisational culture is influenced by one's assumptions. As we have seen, defining and interpreting organisational culture reveals many issues and is intimately linked to the theoretical framework one embraces. (Smircich, 1983). The models described here have shown the complexity in understanding organisational culture, and by extension the concept and reality of organisation.

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## **Appendix 1 - A short presentation of the University of the West of England.**

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The University of the West of England gained its University status in 1992. UWE is a large university based across five campuses located in Bristol (Frenchay, St Matthias, Glenside and Bower Ashton) and in Gloucester (Alexandra Warehouse). UWE employs 3,521 staff, covering academic, technical and professional roles to support the 30,069 students enrolled.

The University has four faculties:

- Faculty of Business and Law.
- Faculty of Environment and Technology.
- Faculty of Health and Life Sciences.
- Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries and Education.

Through its teaching, research and knowledge exchange activities, UWE is involved in many sectors such as engineering, education, construction and the creative arts. UWE has strong links with the local economy and communities.

Further information about the University can be found on its website.

[www.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus)