

# The darker side of strong organizational cultures: looking forward by looking back

*This work was made openly accessible by BU Faculty. Please [share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters.*

---

Version	First author draft
Citation (published version):	M. Anteby, M. Rajunov. "The Darker Side of Strong Organizational Cultures: Looking Forward by Looking Back."

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/45253>

*Boston University*

**The Darker Side of Strong Organizational Cultures:  
Looking Forward by Looking Back**

Michel Anteby\* and Micah Rajunov

*Boston University*

- July 24, 2022 -

Prepared for *The Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*

(Editors: Shai M. Dromi, Steve Hitlin, and Aliza Luft)

Keywords: organizational culture, corporations, morality, ethics, immoral behavior

Word count: 4,860 without references

\* Corresponding Author: Michel Anteby, Boston University Questrom School of Business, 595 Commonwealth Ave, Boston, MA 02215, USA / Email: [manteby@bu.edu](mailto:manteby@bu.edu)

Micah Rajunov, Boston University Questrom School of Business, 595 Commonwealth Ave, Boston, MA 02215, USA / Email: [rajunov@bu.edu](mailto:rajunov@bu.edu)

# **The Darker Side of Strong Organizational Cultures: Looking Forward by Looking Back**

## **Abstract**

Organizational cultures encompass the norms, values, and beliefs that guide the thinking and actions of organizational members. In this chapter, we highlight the moral power and ambiguity of such cultures. We review early research on organizational culture, and showcase its historical roots in moral questions around ideological control. We then trace how an emphasis on strong culture and firm performance slowly eroded these moral underpinnings. We also highlight specific studies that have surfaced the oft-forgotten moral consequences of these strong cultures. Next, we illustrate our argument with two research streams (i.e., research on person-organization “fit” and research on the culture of business schools) that reveal a darker, more insidious side, of strong organizational culture. The *darker* moral side occurs when the moral repercussions of organizational culture are masked by good intentions from management, internalized by employees as beneficial, and lead to harmful consequences for workers, firms, and/or society. Finally, we discuss how increased public awareness of the moral dimensions of work necessitate a deeper understanding of the moral implications of organizational culture.

(173 words)

## **Author Biographies**

Michel Anteby is a Professor of Management & Organizations at Boston University’s Questrom School of Business and of Sociology at Boston University’s College of Arts & Sciences. His research looks at how individuals relate to their work, their occupations, and the organizations they belong to. He examines more specifically the practices people engage in at work that help them sustain their chosen cultures or identities. He is the author of *Manufacturing Morals* (University of Chicago Press) and *Moral Gray Zones* (Princeton University Press).

Micah Rajunov is a PhD candidate in the Management & Organizations department at Boston University’s Questrom School of Business. His research asks how people make sense of their work and their professional identity, especially when faced with rapid societal or technological change. His dissertation examines the lives of professional competitive video gamers in the emerging field of esports. Before joining academia, he worked at several technology startups, and served as a consultant and advocate for LGBTQ health.

Several decades ago, America's economic and industrial future was under threat by upcoming foreign frontrunners, particularly from Japan. To counteract this period of intense doubt stemming from this growing international competition, strong organizational culture became the shiny new trend for American businesses. In their influential book *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (1982), Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman surveyed U.S. companies and remarked that many companies "had cultures as strong as any Japanese organization" (p. xxii) and that the word culture itself seemed "to pop up more and more frequently in business journalism" (p. 105). Critically, they concluded, "Without exception, the dominance and coherence of culture proved to be an essential quality of the excellent companies" that they examined (p. 75). Their implicit hope was that deliberately designing "strong" corporate cultures —namely, ones with "a set of norms and values that are widely shared and strongly held throughout the organization" (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996, p. 166)— might save America from its industrial demise. Business executives, managers, and consultants soon rallied around this call; numerous books sprang up, titled, for instance, *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness* (Denison, 1990) and *Corporate Culture and Performance* (Kotter, 2008). Each version promised to fulfill the dream of organizational success fueled by a strong culture.

The (strong) organizational culture wildfire had caught on in corporate America and beyond. Some observers cautioned that organizational "culture was not always a positive force" (O'Reilly, 1989, p. 10), or that its benefits could backfire given the increasingly turbulent and unpredictable environment companies were facing (Sørensen, 2002). Despite these warnings, business pundits embraced it as promoting innovation and other corporate wish-list advantages (such as productivity, employee turnover, and more). Quickly, being an organization *without* a strong culture implied a recipe for failure. Several companies even employed corporate ethnographers to better understand and presumably shape their own cultures (Fayard & Van Maanen, 2015). Trouble seemed on the horizon for corporate executives when they could not articulate their culture.

Yet the moral implications of these corporate cultures were rarely problematized. By moral, we mean what a society deems right. Whether these strong cultures would lead to a more equitable society or prove less exploitative for employees were not pressing concerns. Instead, the increased market share, rising profits, and growth benefits that strong cultures promised

almost unequivocally justified their embrace. At the time, the moral consequences of strong cultures for organizations, their members, and, more broadly, society hardly registered as key concerns. Only observant bystanders to the business community, like Robert Jackall (1988) and Calvin Morrill (1995), warned about the less desirable moral outcomes of promoting such strong cultures.

Fast forward to more contemporary workplaces: people began to increasingly take note that the exact same strong cultures that supposedly allowed so many companies to thrive were also behind more harmful outcomes. Whether it be the suicides of Foxconn factory workers in China (Chan & Pun, 2010), the prevalence of pedophilia in the U.S. Catholic Church (Alexander, 2018), the fraudulent deception committed by Enron leaders and some of its employees (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003), the fall of the former accounting giant Arthur Anderson (Hallett, 2003), or the police brutality against racial minorities across U.S. precincts (Holmes & Smith, 2008), the damages that unexamined organizational cultures could cause suddenly entered the spotlight. Perhaps nowhere faster and more fiercely than with the 2017 #MeToo movement have these damages been surfaced and condemned. Working at the “creative” and “independent” Weinstein Company film studio abruptly took on a completely new meaning as sexual harassment accusations mounted against its founder, Harvey Weinstein. The studio’s culture, heavily shaped by its leader, likely facilitated these abuses of power. But now victims were publicly coming forward, eventually spurring an international movement against sexual violence at work. Employees and clients began speaking up about their experiences, shining a new light on the harmful effects of a strong organizational culture.

Under what conditions can strong cultures—where workers internalize these values as their own— lead to immoral behavior? Might the absence of a strong organizational culture suddenly prove more appealing? Is it possible to create an organizational culture that benefits organizations, their members, and society all at once? These questions suggest that organizational culture is likely to become a renewed concern for scholars of morality and organizations. We argue in this chapter that research on organizational culture can re-invigorate its agenda by returning to its historical roots. We start with a review of early research on organizational culture, and trace how the emphasis on performance slowly eroded culture’s moral underpinnings. We also discuss specific streams of research that surfaced the oft-forgotten moral consequences of promoting strong cultures. Finally, we highlight how increasing

awareness of moral dimensions of work, by both scholars and the general public, beg for resurfacing the inquiry into the morality of organizational culture.

### **The Early Hopes for (and Limited Warnings about) Organizational Culture**

It has only been 40 years since scholars started writing specifically and in depth about organizational culture (Pettigrew, 1979). Yet, its role in shaping, constraining, and enriching people's experiences at work has already spurred a vibrant and diverse research community. Early on, organizational culture was described as “an ideology that helps edit a member's everyday experience, [a] shared standard of relevance as to the critical aspects of the work that is being accomplished” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 210). Later, synthesizing research across the social sciences, Edgar Schein (1985, 1990) wrote about organizational culture as a pattern of shared assumptions, beliefs, values, norms, and artifacts—a definition that has since widely been embraced. The fastest to jump on the research bandwagon were organizational ethnographers who approached the study of culture by describing variations across settings—ranging from funeral homes (Barley, 1983) to banks (Weeks, 2004) and software firms (Perlow, 1999)—to help explain the social mechanisms and configurations sustaining given cultures. A key assumption in these studies is that organizations as well as employees benefit in one way or another from harboring such unique and individualized cultures.

In parallel, scholars drawing from social psychology began studying the relationship between an organization's culture and its performance. These researchers examined the congruence between organizational and individual cultural values to understand how culture shapes employees' socialization, satisfaction, and tenure—also key ingredients of an organization's ultimate success (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). The interplay between organizational contexts and select outcomes proved quite valuable in better explaining workplace behavior (Mowday & Sutton, 1993). As an example, a study of the Body Shop describes how its (mainly female) members were encouraged to express contained emotions at work. This culture of “bounded emotionality” promoted community building and personal wellbeing; at the same time, it offered a way for the firm to potentially grow and prosper in a crowded and competitive market (Martin et al., 1998). In short, the Body Shop's unique culture was what made it so successful.

In addition, cultures can sometimes transcend organizations and infuse entire regions or sectors. A prime example of these dynamics can be found by tracing the careers of the “Baxter

Boys,” namely those who started their careers in one pharmaceutical firm (i.e., Baxter) and went on to lead many other firms in the same industry (Higgins, 2005). At the time, headhunters specifically sought out people socialized at Baxter because of their “entrepreneurial spirit” and placed them in more bureaucratic contexts (such as Merck, Johnson & Johnson, and Abbott) with the hope of seeding these settings with the prior culture. Many such transplants succeeded and allowed the culture to diffuse throughout the pharmaceutical industry. Likewise, in her study on the evolution of the high-tech industry, Annalee Saxenian (1994) documented how Silicon Valley companies thrived as they fostered a free flow of ideas between like-minded organizations. On the other side of the country, companies in Boston’s Route 128 shriveled as they clung to old notions of bureaucracy and hierarchy. Implicit in these approaches is that organizational cultures can provide a competitive advantage to certain firms and deliver on the many rewards that Peters and Waterman promised in the early 1980s.

None of the above scholars seemed entirely smitten—in the way business pundits were—by the positive transformative power of strong culture. Prominent researchers likened culture to a form of control (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996). Yet, researchers still focused more on specifying the contents of these cultures and tying them to firms’ superior performance rather than interrogating them. Gradually, however, more skeptical voices emerged pointing to other, perhaps less righteous, moral implications of such cultures. In *Moral Mazes*, Robert Jackall (1988) described how some managers neglected the maintenance of manufacturing plants when their timeline on the job would not be long enough to reap personal career benefits from such investments. Such decisions seemed “culturally” fitting yet morally suspicious; these managers’ decisions endangered not only the firm’s longer-term survival but also the safety of their employees. Similarly, Calvin Morrill (1995) explained how many U.S. corporate executives prefer silent disagreements and sending indirect signals to detractors—even to the detriment of a firm’s success—rather than publicly discussing competing views. More critically, Diane Vaughan (1996, 1999) analyzed how mistakes and misconduct can become normalized within an organization. A strong culture provides employees with a template to interpret events and act accordingly. In her study, events that signaled danger were continually interpreted as acceptable; managers consequently downplayed or ignored employees when they raised concerns about life-threatening hazards. Such conformity to an organizational culture led to the explosion of NASA’s Challenger shuttle—a damning moral outcome, to say the least.

The strongest critic of the idealized view of organizational culture came from within the industry that had perhaps most embraced it: the software industry. New technology was supposed to save America from its manufacturing demise. In his book *Engineering Culture*, Gideon Kunda (1992) unflatteringly portrayed the organizational culture of a software firm that exerted normative control on its engineers. Kunda flagged one of the central tensions of strong cultures: “Though many members maintain a sense of freedom, they also experience a pull that is not easy to combat, an escalating commitment to the corporation and its definitions of reality, coupled with a systematic and persistent attack on the boundaries of their privacy” (p. 224). These and other critics (e.g., Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; C. A. Ray, 1986; Sallaz, 2009) tempered the expected enthusiasm following any new “culture” initiative put forth by organizational leaders. A corporate culture “survival guide” suddenly seemed necessary (Schein, 2008).

### **The Forgotten Moral Roots of Organizational Culture Research**

It is worth noting that Edgar Schein, the author of the aforementioned survival guide, is also one of the early central disseminators of the term “culture” in management and organizational research. His initial work on returning U.S. prisoners during the Korean War directly influenced research and thinking on corporate cultures. As he explains, “Since I was very interested in social influence I decided to pull repatriates randomly off the line and interview them about their prison camp experiences. I asked each repatriate just to tell me his story from the moment of his capture. These stories fell into clear patterns that resulted in my being able to define in general terms what the Chinese indoctrination program consisted of, why it worked on a few people...” (Schein, 2006, p. 291). After that, Schein “decided to study how corporations indoctrinate their employees” by launching a panel study involving detailed career analysis of MIT masters alumni (p. 293). The term “indoctrination” itself contains moral undertones since it points to a process of teaching people to accept a certain set of beliefs rather uncritically. Indoctrination that goes unchecked and unquestioned sows the seeds for immoral acts. People who believe they are acting for the greater good—be it for their country or their company—are vulnerable to excusing the immoral consequences of their actions. This research echoed earlier attempts at understanding how people are socialized into a broader group (e.g., Elias, 2006) and subsequently commit themselves to collective ideals (e.g., Kanter, 1968), even when such ideals are prone to contestation.



Thus Schein's fascination with culture was rooted in the power of organizations to shape people's beliefs and guide their behavior as well as the potential dangers of such a phenomenon. To him, questions of culture and morality seemed inherently intertwined. However, decades of popular buzz slowly buried these roots. Beyond infatuation with a management fad, obsessive discussions and attempts to "strengthen" culture allowed organizations to ignore other related topics—particularly the morally dubious outcome of such pursuits. Historically, much of the research on organizational culture emerged out of business schools, which often spoke to managers' business concerns. This alignment between researchers and managers reinforced organizational culture's promise to meet business goals, and any pitfalls of organizational culture were quickly forgotten.

The evolution of this scholarship at Harvard Business School serves as an illustrative example. Starting in the 1920s, Elton Mayo at the Harvard Business School spearheaded a stream of research on workplace relations. He promoted the idea of fostering a collaborative culture at work, accompanied by the claim that paying more attention to workers' needs would revolutionize managerial practice. The notion that such a "collaborative" culture might strategically serve to tame any discord linked to "structural and power inequalities" barely registered at the time on Mayo's mind (Van Maanen, 2013). Instead, the movement that later became known as the Human Relations' school planted the seeds for conceptualizing culture as a fruitful and generative opportunity for all involved. Rapidly, the rosier view of culture sidetracked the moral questions that spurred early research on organizational culture. Though scholars have not shied away from pointing out the contradictions and paradoxes in these fragmented approaches to culture (e.g. Giorgi et al., 2015; Smircich, 1983; Weber & Dacin, 2011), the popular view of strong corporate culture remained fairly upbeat.

### **The Growing Evidence of Organizational Cultures' Darker Moral Side**

Increasingly, researchers have spotlighted the darker side of organizational cultures (Greve et al., 2010). The dark moral side of organizational culture occurs when organizations condone or even encourage immoral behaviors. In the case of Wells Fargo, for instance, the bank openly took advantage of its clients. Their culture around sales rewarded employees with financial incentives for meeting their metrics, regardless of how they achieved that metric (Tayan, 2019). This led the bank's salesforce to create millions of fraudulent savings and checking accounts on behalf of

clients without their consent. This surge benefited mainly salespeople and the bank's bottom line, even though their actions put customers at financial risk. Despite criticism from the media, leadership refuted any wrongdoing and permitted these practices to continue.

The *darker* moral side occurs when the moral repercussions of organizational culture are masked by good intentions from management, internalized by employees as beneficial, and lead to harmful consequences for workers, firms, and/or society. When Enron employees started manipulating its accounting practices, management masked the move as exemplary of the firm's "innovative" thinking—a key tenet of its culture (Benke, 2018, p. 115). Eventually the spread of this unintended corruption led to the company's sudden implosion and deafening downfall.

Next, we detail two research streams that reveal this darker, more insidious side, of organizational culture. First, studies aiming to understand how and when employees are most likely to "fit" with an organizational culture illustrate the often-overlooked moral implications of strong cultures. The notion of cultural fit greatly influences who gets hired and who gets fired, and composition of people within organizations subsequently shapes its moral stand. Second, business schools are the training ground for managers who make critical decisions within organizations. Therefore, the culture of business schools is one of the main funnels shaping managers' values; these same managers move on to influence the origins and contents of corporate cultures.

Early research argued that person-organization fit predicted job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and other behaviors (O'Reilly et al., 1991). Subsequent scholarship continually developed surveys and scales to measure an employee's alignment with organizational norms and values (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). The implied recommendation was to screen for fit early on to prevent turnover and other undesired outcomes. Recent studies have moved away from conceptualizing fit as a static alignment between the employee and the organization's values by examining employee's *enculturation trajectories*—that is, dynamic fit over time (Srivastava et al., 2018). They contend that employees can learn to fit in with the culture rather than being a fit from the onset (Mobasserri et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this research continues to show that failure to attain cultural fit increases the likelihood of an involuntary exit. The implication for organizations and employees is that conformity is key. Yet as early critics like Vaughan and Morrill warned, too much conformity can cause more harm than good.

This fanatical focus on cultural fit persists today among employees, managers, and some researchers. More critical scholars, however, have interrogated the consequences for employees when they believe that “fit” with an organization is more important than skills. Ofer Sharone (2014) found that white collar job seekers in the U.S. mostly worry about improving their personal shortcomings to increase their “chemistry” with an organization. Candidates then attribute rejections to personal failure rather than a lack of skills; they see their whole self as flawed. Such existential crises justify the need for people to construct new selves, ones that mirror the market logics of independence and entrepreneurialism. This notion of developing a “personal brand” emerged out of the original organizational culture discourse of the 1980s (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). In the decades since, employee tenure in organizations has shortened, and the hold of organizational culture has purportedly decreased. Yet, now the individual is encouraged to self-impose a strong culture, normatively enforcing a profit-generating inclination on themselves (Vallas & Christin, 2018).

This perspective is further problematic when considering that organizational “fit” is often assessed in relation to dominant and existing cultures. Since organizational norms and values are typically constructed around notions of masculinity (Acker, 1990), straightness (Anteby & Anderson, 2014), and whiteness (V. E. Ray, 2019), promoting cultural fit results in continued exclusion of minorities and other disadvantaged groups within organizations. Indeed, Lauren Rivera (2012) detailed how “cultural matching” between employers and job candidates resulted in hiring culturally similar others. In her study she found that, ironically, surface diversity masked cultural homogeneity; despite hiring gender and ethnic minorities, selected candidates were still ones with access to elite educations and upper-class hobbies.

Self-conscious initiatives to counter inequality by changing the organizational culture often backfire. For example, some organizations try to reconcile their aim of fairness with the fuzziness inherent in finding a cultural fit through meritocratic myths (Amis et al., 2019). But organizational cultures that center rationality and objectivity as the basis for equality are perhaps even more dangerous, since they obscure the reproduction of often-hidden social and cultural capital available to the already privileged. This “paradox of meritocracy” was evidenced in an experimental study where managers were asked to allocate a performance bonus to employees (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Participants who were primed with “core company values” of meritocracy rewarded men with a higher bonus than equally qualified women. Importantly, this

study highlights how organizational culture can perpetuate inequality beyond entry into an organization or occupation. Culture shapes organizational processes such as job selection, promotion, compensation, or task assignment. And organizational culture differentially impacts members' experiences outside of work as well. For instance, a culture that expects employees' total devotion and commitment to work amplifies discrimination already experienced by women in the workplace (Reid, 2015). Organizational culture therefore binds people together but also excludes others.

But where do managers learn about these purported advantages of organizational culture? And, more generally, where do many of them directly experience such cultures? A second stream of research showcases the pitfalls of strong cultures found in some business schools and their potential effects on the workplaces that school alumni go on to lead (Abend, 2016; Anteby, 2013; Orta, 2019). For decades, researchers focused their attention on describing the cultures of different industries where business school graduates tend to land (e.g., Jackall, 1988; Morrill, 1995). Scholars noted, for instance, how investment bankers embrace a “liquid” culture of job insecurity and short-term incentives that “help[s] contribute to the creation of both unstable, unsustainable markets *and* jobs” (Ho, 2009, p. 235). Bankers are taught to value profits over people without fully realizing the consequences that this strategy has on the labor market itself. Bankers also devote a significant number of hours to their organizations, a working load that eventually takes a toll on their own physical wellbeing (Michel, 2012).

Yet the training grounds of these business elites—and the organizational cultures that possibly gave rise to such behaviors—remained mostly off-limits to inquiry. Encouraged by calls to study-up (Nader, 1972) and to refocus scholarly efforts on the study of elites (Cousin et al., 2018), recent scholarship has examined these training grounds or “identity workspaces” in more depth (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Andrew Orta’s (2019) recent work on the “globalization” of business education is indicative of such efforts. His study looks at new initiatives in schools that, in the wake of recent corporate scandals, aim to “increase ethics education and infuse ethics training across all functional areas of the [MBA] curriculum” (p. 24). While some “ethical business” initiatives might seem new, business schools’ history of trying to deliberately shape the morality of future managers is not.

The case of the Harvard Business School’s culture epitomizes these intentions. The school holds a special place in the making of corporate morals since it has always viewed itself

as encouraging its students to aim for “higher goals” (Khurana, 2010). Like many other elite business schools (Schleef, 2005), Harvard’s aspiration is not only to teach their students useable skills but also for students to develop a certain idealized view of themselves and, more broadly, managerial elites. Up until a few years ago, new faculty members joining Harvard Business School were given a book titled *Education for Judgment* (Christensen et al., 1991). It was meant to underscore the school’s educational hopes of engaging its students in a process of self-discovery. To realize this goal, the school developed an organizational culture that promotes a “perception of self-determination” (Anteby, 2013, p. 9). In short, students are taught to think of their actions as highly agentic and consequential. They are taught to believe their judgments and actions matter in this moral quest.

Yet, while the school’s socialization model heavily scripts faculty members’ teaching tasks (e.g., how to lead a case discussion, what prompt to ask students in class, and more), the model remains surprisingly silent on the moral compass that might guide students’ (agentic) decision making. In fact, an “ideology of non-ideology” is strongly enforced so its faculty members refrain from collectively taking an explicitly moral stand, in part for fear of antagonizing any part of the school’s membership (Anteby, 2016). This imposed silence implicitly primes future business leaders not to vilify any moral stand; in doing so, this “neutral” ideology ends up justifying almost all stands. Under the guise of promoting higher goals, the school’s culture de-facto socializes its members into *not* imposing any strong moral viewpoint on others. Such an organizational culture proves far-reaching since almost anything can be labeled “morally acceptable”— and thus nothing can be really deemed “immoral.” This position mirrors the moral relativism that Gabriel Abend (2016) documented in many business settings in the United States. Such relativism typically benefits those in power over those who aim to reform any given system.

As the darker sides of organizational cultures are better understood, Edgar Schein’s early interest in indoctrination and the potential pitfalls of strong cultures suddenly gains new saliency. A finer and more complex understanding of the functioning of organizational cultures—to promote or prevent social change—foregrounds the need to continue exploring the moral implications of strong cultures. These and many other studies call for even more scrutiny of how strong organizational culture reflects and shapes society.

## Conclusion

From the perspective of organizational leaders, the ultimate goal of a strong or effective organizational culture is a system of norms, values, and beliefs that are accepted and adopted unquestioningly by its members, so that members behave predictably as prescribed. The beauty of such an idealized view of culture rests in the hope that all members act as one for the benefit of the organization. Yet, reality is never quite as neat. Increasingly, people are pointing to how the interests of those who engineer specific organizational cultures might not be aligned with employees or society. As Vincent Meek reminds us, “An adequate theory of culture needs to be divorced from the direct interests of management and the naive assumption that a ‘successful corporate culture’ is either ‘naturally good and stabilizing’ or can be ‘consciously manipulated’” (1988, p. 462).

What matters more than simply building a “strong” culture is to better understand who drives it and the moral assumptions embedded in it, regardless of avowed goals. Robert Jackall (2010) notes in the previous edition of this Handbook that morality in organizations depends on “the extent to which men and women, driven by personal ambitions, subject themselves to the exigence of their particular organizations... In the process, they recreate a world where morality is inseparable from the pursuit of one’s own advantage” (p. 209). The key question is therefore identifying whose advantage is being served by developing strong organizational cultures, and at whose expense. Put otherwise, what is the price to pay for achieving performance outcomes? And, who might be paying the highest price?

Whereas early research was mostly concerned with the building, maintenance, and reproduction of organizational culture, new streams spotlight how members can resist and change culture (Weber & Dacin, 2011). Culture is a process of continual enactment, where individuals compare their perception of what the organization is to their beliefs of what the organization “ought to be” (Hatch, 1993). In a study illustrating this dynamic, a modern technology company advocated a culture of openness and transparency, yet leaders were still upholding strong structures of control (Turco, 2016). Employees manifested against this very culture by speaking up about the contradictions and noting how their experiences did not match the stated corporate intentions. On the other hand, even well-intentioned organizational cultures can backfire. Entrenched professional norms can lead members to resist changes that would be

beneficial to them (Kellogg, 2011). Questions of pushback and resistance are inherently moral ones since they point to divergent viewpoints between organizations, members, and society.

Now that a vast number of white-collar professionals—the typical seekers and advocates of strong organizational cultures—have experienced working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, they have seen first-hand the pros and cons of a sudden “absence” of a strong face-to-face culture. Organizational members might feel a renewed energy to more strongly shape the culture they aspire to live in. Alternatively, the future of organizational culture might look different than its more upbeat past as workers embrace authenticity in the workplace, promoting a plurality of individualized values. A dwindling tolerance to put up with strong workplace cultures that reflect the biases and prejudices of dominant groups might give way for a new appreciation of “weaker” organizational cultures.

The increasing consciousness of the darker side of organizational culture points to the necessity to deepen our understanding of culture. Specifically, we need to systematically investigate the conditions under which organizational cultures lead to immoral behavior and harmful consequences. Research on organizational culture has progressed from two ontological perspectives that could inform further inquiry. The first view (rooted in the fit tradition) assumes leaders can actively shape an organization’s culture. Though embedded in a broader external environment (Zucker, 1988), leaders are still seen as principal engineers of culture. But instead of considering *how* leaders can shape culture, this literature might want to pivot and ask whether they *should*. Those looking at culture from its roots in anthropology eschew the notion that culture can be “managed” to make an organization more “effective” (Meek, 1988). Instead of being something that an organization *has*—an independent variable to be engineered and manipulated from above—culture is something an organization *is*—the end result of an emergent collective process (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Smircich, 1983; Weick, 1979). Again, a revisiting of the morality of cultural constructions is warranted. It is not because something *is* that it *should* be, or that it cannot be consciously changed. Regardless of researchers’ starting point, the moral finality of organizational culture cannot remain unquestioned.

These studies and recent developments in the field highlight the moral power and ambiguity of organizational culture: it can stifle as much as enrich employees’ experiences at work. Employees can succumb to its controlling force, oppose and challenge it, or use it as a catalyst for change. The outcomes of any one strategy can be beneficial or detrimental to the

organization, its members, and society more broadly. Above all, the consequences of strong organizational culture warrant caution and skepticism by managers, workers, and outside observers alike. The coming decades will likely prove a fertile testing ground for such ideas and for a continued examination of the moral implications of existing and emerging assumptions about organizational cultures.



## References

- Abend, G. (2016). *The Moral Background: An Inquiry into the History of Business Ethics*. Princeton University Press.
- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society, 4*(2), 139–158.
- Alexander, J. C. (2018). The Societalization of Social Problems: Church Pedophilia, Phone Hacking, and the Financial Crisis. *American Sociological Review, 83*(6), 1049–1078.
- Amis, J. M., Mair, J., & Munir, K. A. (2019). The Organizational Reproduction of Inequality. *Academy of Management Annals, 14*(1), 195–230.
- Anteby, M. (2013). *Manufacturing Morals: The Values of Silence in Business School Education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Anteby, M. (2016). Ideology of Science at The Harvard Business School: Structuring Faculty's Teaching Tasks for Moral Relativism. *Sociology of Organizations, 47*, 103–121.
- Anteby, M., & Anderson, C. (2014). The Shifting Landscape of LGBT Organizational Research. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 34*, 3–25.
- Barley, S. R. (1983). The Codes of the Dead: The Semiotics of Funeral Work. *Urban Life, 12*(1), 3–31.
- Benke, G. (2018). *Risk and Ruin: Enron and the Culture of American Capitalism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Castilla, E. J., & Benard, S. (2010). The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 55*(4), 543–676.
- Chan, J., & Pun, N. (2010). Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State. *The Asia-Pacific Journal, 37*(2), 1–50.

- Chatman, J. A., & O'Reilly, C. A. (2016). Paradigm Lost: Reinvigorating The Study of Organizational Culture. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 36, 199–224.
- Christensen, C. R., Garvin, D. A., & Sweet, A. (Eds.). (1991). *Education For Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Cousin, B., Khan, S., & Mears, A. (2018). Theoretical and Methodological Pathways for Research on Elites. *Socio-Economic Review*, 16(2), 225–249.
- Denison, D. R. (1990). *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Elias, N. (2006). *The Court Society*. University College Dublin Press.
- Fayard, A.-L., & Van Maanen, J. (2015). Making Culture Visible: Reflections on Corporate Ethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 4(1), 4–27.
- Fleming, P., & Sturdy, A. (2011). 'Being Yourself' in the Electronic Sweatshop: New Forms of Normative Control. *Human Relations*, 64(2), 177–200.
- Giorgi, S., Lockwood, C., & Glynn, M. A. (2015). The Many Faces of Culture: Making Sense of 30 Years of Research on Culture in Organization Studies. *Academy of Management Annals*, 9(1), 1–54.
- Greve, H. R., Palmer, D., & Pozner, E. (2010). Organizations Gone Wild: The Causes, Processes, and Consequences of Organizational Misconduct. *Academy of Management Annals*, 4(1), 53–107.
- Hallett, T. (2003). Symbolic Power and Organizational Culture. *Sociological Theory*, 21(2), 128–149.
- Hatch, M. J. (1993). The Dynamics of Organizational Culture. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(4), 657–693.

- Higgins, M. C. (2005). *Career Imprints: Creating Leaders Across an Industry* (Vol. 16). John Wiley & Sons.
- Ho, K. (2009). *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.
- Holmes, M. D., & Smith, B. W. (2008). *Race and Police Brutality: Roots of an Urban Dilemma*. SUNY Press.
- Jackall, R. (1988). *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*. Oxford University Press.
- Jackall, R. (2010). Morality in organizations. In *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality* (pp. 203-209). Springer.
- Kanter, R. M. (1968). Commitment and Social Organization—Study of Commitment Mechanisms in Utopian Communities. *American Sociological Review*, 33(4), 499–517.
- Kellogg, K. C. (2011). *Challenging Operations: Medical Reform and Resistance in Surgery*. University of Chicago Press.
- Khurana, R. (2010). *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession*. Princeton University Press.
- Kotter, J. P. (2008). *Corporate Culture and Performance*. Simon And Schuster.
- Kunda, G. (1992). *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Temple University Press.
- Martin, J., Knopoff, K., & Beckman, C. (1998). An Alternative to Bureaucratic Impersonality and Emotional Labor: Bounded Emotionality at The Body Shop. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43(2), 429–429.
- Meek, V. L. (1988). Organizational Culture: Origins and Weaknesses. *Organization Studies*, 9(4), 453–473.

- Michel, A. (2012). Transcending Socialization: A Nine-Year Ethnography of the Body's Role in Organizational Control and Knowledge Workers' Transformation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*.
- Mobasser, S., Goldberg, A., & Srivastava, S. B. (2019). What is Cultural Fit? From Cognition to Behavior (and Back). In W. Brekhus & G. Ignatow (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Sociology* (pp. 1–20). Oxford University Press.
- Morrill, C. (1995). *The Executive Way: Conflict Management in Corporations*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mowday, R. T., & Sutton, R. I. (1993). Organizational Behavior: Linking Individuals and Groups to Organizational Contexts. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44, 195–229.
- Nader, L. (1972). Up The Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up. In D. H. Hymes (Ed.), *Reinventing Anthropology* (1st Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- O'Reilly, C. A. (1989). Corporations, Culture, and Commitment: Motivation and Social Control in Organizations. *California Management Review*, 31(4), 9–25.
- O'Reilly, C. A., & Chatman, J. A. (1996). Culture as Social Control: Corporations, Cults, and Commitment. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 18, 157–200.
- O'Reilly, C. A., Chatman, J. A., & Caldwell, D. F. (1991). People and Organizational Culture: A Profile Comparison Approach to Assessing Person-Fit. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34(4), 487–516.
- Orta, A. (2019). *Making Global MBAs: The Culture of Business and the Business of Culture*. University Of California Press.
- Ouchi, W. G., & Wilkins, A. L. (1985). Organizational Culture. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 11, 457–483.

- Perlow, L. A. (1999). The Time Famine: Toward a Sociology of Work Time. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(1), 57–81.
- Peters, T. J., & Waterman, R. H. (1982). *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. Harper & Row.
- Petriglieri, G., & Petriglieri, J. L. (2010). Identity Workspaces: The Case of Business Schools. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 9(1), 44–60.
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1979). On Studying Organizational Cultures. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(4), 570–581.
- Ray, C. A. (1986). Corporate Culture: The Last Frontier of Control? *Journal of Management Studies*, 23(3), 287–297.
- Ray, V. E. (2019). A Theory of Racialized Organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 26–53.
- Reid, E. (2015). Embracing, Passing, Revealing, and the Ideal Worker Image: How People Navigate Expected and Experienced Professional Identities. *Organization Science*, 26(4), 997–1017.
- Rivera, L. A. (2012). Hiring as Cultural Matching. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 999–1022.
- Sallaz, J. J. (2009). *The Labor of Luck: Casino Capitalism in the United States and South Africa*. University of California Press.
- Saxenian, A. (1994). *Regional Advantage*. Harvard University Press.
- Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational Culture And Leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Schein, E. H. (1990). Organizational Culture. *American Psychologist*, 45(2), 109–119.

- Schein, E. H. (2006). From Brainwashing to Organizational Therapy: A Conceptual and Empirical Journey in Search of ‘Systemic’ Health and a General Model of Change Dynamics. A Drama in Five Acts. *Organization Studies*, 27(2), 287–301.
- Schein, E. H. (2008). *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Schleef, D. J. (2005). *Managing Elites: Socialization in Law and Business Schools*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Sharone, O. (2014). *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences*. University Of Chicago Press.
- Sims, R. R., & Brinkmann, J. (2003). Enron Ethics (Or: Culture Matters More than Codes). *Journal of Business Ethics*, 45(3), 243–256.
- Smircich, L. (1983). Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28(3), 339–358.
- Sørensen, J. B. (2002). The Strength of Corporate Culture and the Reliability of Firm Performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47(1), 70–91.
- Srivastava, S. B., Goldberg, A., Manian, V. G., & Potts, C. (2018). Enculturation Trajectories: Language, Cultural Adaptation, and Individual Outcomes in Organizations. *Management Science*, 64(3), 1348–1364.
- Tayan, B. (2019). The Wells Fargo Cross-Selling Scandal. *Rock Center for Corporate Governance at Stanford University Closer Look Series: Topics, Issues and Controversies in Corporate Governance No. CGRP-62 Version, 2*, 17–1.
- Turco, C. (2016). Open Culture. In *The Conversational Firm: Rethinking Bureaucracy in the Age of Social Media*. Columbia University Press.

- Vallas, S. P., & Christin, A. (2018). Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to “Personal Branding” Discourse. *Work and Occupations*, 45(1), 3–37.
- Vallas, S. P., & Cummins, E. R. (2015). Personal Branding and Identity Norms in the Popular Business Press: Enterprise Culture in an Age of Precarity. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 293–319.
- Van Maanen, J. (2013). Hold the Mayo: Some Comments on the Origins of Organizational Ethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 105–107.
- Van Maanen, J., & Schein, E. H. (1979). Toward a Theory of Organizational Socialization. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 1, 209–264.
- Vaughan, D. (1996). *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*. University of Chicago Press.
- Vaughan, D. (1999). The Dark Side of Organizations: Mistake, Misconduct, and Disaster. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25(1), 271–305.
- Weber, K., & Dacin, M. T. (2011). The Cultural Construction of Organizational Life: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Organization Science*, 22(2), 287–298.
- Weeks, J. (2004). *Unpopular Culture: The Ritual Of Complaint In A British Bank*. University of Chicago Press.
- Weick, K. E. (1979). *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (2nd Ed.). Addison-Wesley.
- Zucker, L. G. (1988). *Institutional Patterns and Organizations: Culture And Environment*. Ballinger Publishing.