

maintaining and changing cultures: understanding what culture is and is not, mechanisms for trying to read a specific organization's culture, and an examination of the ethical issues involved. Acting on any of the stories about an organization's culture requires an examination of the question: Are such actions ethical? We conclude that ethical issues are indeed involved, and can best be faced and answered by assessing the full range of consequences involved. Another general consideration was choosing between cultural maintenance and culture innovation.

We distilled from the relevant literature specific aphorisms about maintaining, changing, and creating

cultures. These pulled together relevant data into a summary form that we hoped would convey the essence of complex sets of ideas. Different parts of these themes touch upon, for example, selecting, modifying and creating cultural forms consistent with the discovery and articulation of distinctive, new ideologies; recruiting like-minded people; capitalizing on propitious moments for change; and the cultivation of cultural leadership.

We found weaving together the diverse ideas in the cultural literature into these stories a stimulating and exciting endeavor. We hope our excitement about them is shared by our readers.

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## Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation

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Engineering Culture grew out of an attempt to take seriously the conceptual and methodological requirements of a cultural perspective on organizations. Briefly, the book is a critical ethnography of a large and successful high-tech corporation lauded in the popular managerial literature for its innovative post-bureaucratic "corporate culture." The corporate culture, the official story went, drove the company's employees to peaks of corporate performance and personal self-actualization. Academic views of these managerial claims fell, unsurprisingly, into two distinct camps. On the one hand (the upper one, of course) were those who participated in the construction of this grand utopian narrative: numerous texts reinforced, jargonized, and legitimated managerial claims and fed them back to ever-hungry corporate consumers of good words. On the other hand, less popular but no less persistent and no less grand, was a continuing stream of criticism of the corporation. In this view, utopian managerial claims were—as ever—no more than a disguise for malevolent managerial intentions, now in the form of tyrannical attempts to penetrate and shape employees' minds and hearts.

Despite my a priori sympathies for the latter view, no matter how platitudinous, it was on the tricky ground between these two grand narratives that I sought to position the book. To this end I asked, in the manner of the skeptical, naturalistically inclined observer, what, if any, realities lurked behind and between managerial efforts to shape culture, and how they are to be evaluated. To answer this question, the materials are presented in the traditional style of ethnographic realism. Three sections comprise the logic of investigation. First, the book documents, analyzes and attempts to organize the managerial conceptualization of the company's corporate culture (including its academic roots.) Out of the abundant managerially mandated texts which permeate the company's everyday life and make up a neverending interpretive backdrop to practical activity—tapes, slogans, speeches, newsletters, videos, fliers, manuals—the book identifies the authors and unpacks their meanings. Underlying all the verbiage, I claim, is an elaborate and highly articulated managerial ideology that presents the company as a nonhierarchical, humanistically inclined, moral collective. More crucially, the ideology constructs a

distinct view of employees—I call it a member role—that prescribes not only their behavior but runs much deeper, offering elaborate scripts for their cognitive and emotional life.

The second section moves from the managerially defined textual backdrop to everyday life to the drama that unfolds before, or through it. It describes in detail the everyday interactions through which the ideology, and the member role it prescribes, is brought to life. Once again in the method of realism, a barely visible yet all-seeing ethnographic eye reports play-by-play action from boardrooms and bar rooms, labs and offices, locations where the various actors take active and passive positions vis à vis the ideology and its requirements of them. The central theme of these rituals performances, the somewhat cynical authorial voice claims, is an unstable balance between Goffmanian role embracement and role distancing which, nevertheless, seems to trap all members in performances in which intimate layers of their selves are publicly enacted and collectively observed.

Finally, in a section which exposes the limits and limitations of realism, the book seeks to capture the experience of that elusive subject, the self. What kinds of selves, it asks, emerge in the glare of the cultural spotlight and in the shadow of its darker side? What forms of experience are constructed when experience itself becomes the target for corporate control? In this chapter answers are sought in the various organizational arenas where the self, however fleetingly, makes itself known: interviews, informal chit chat, chance encounters, office decorations, e-mail exchanges. From this somewhat impressionistic collage of materials an image of a theatrical, ironic and rather unstable organizational self emerges, a self immersed in a paradoxical world in which authenticity is at once prescribed and suspect, in which the theatrical mechanisms undergirding the construction of the self and its reality are in full view, and in which, ironically, the very genre of the text is directly challenged by its own findings.

The book does not seek to resolve this paradoxical culmination of the ethnographic logic. Rather, the text moves in two different directions. First, in the traditional manner, to conclusions, abstractions, and generalizations. The ethnographic materials are used to ask if, how, and to what end cultural engineering accomplishes normative control, and how it is to be evaluated from a moral standpoint. Thus the conclusion brings the text back into the fold, positioning it as an ethnography in the classical style: substantively, it brings an interpretive perspective to bear on some of the central theoretical concerns of students of organizations; and

stylistically it is unabashedly realistic, relying on the assumed authority of the detached observer.

The conclusion is followed by a counterpunctual confessional tale designed to destabilize somewhat the comforts of realism, to preempt the expected critics of the genre (many of whom, not granting readers even the most minimal degree of sophistication, insist on belaboring the shortcomings and obvious limitations of realism over and over again), and to have some writing fun. This tale builds on the hints of impressionism already embedded in the text in order to acknowledge and explore the epistemological, practical and personal limitations of realism. I describe contextual aspects of the study with particular attention to my life circumstances at the time and the events which seemed to me to account for the shape the text assumed. These include the academic context which enabled, defined, interfered with and shaped the fieldwork; the vagaries, pains and tribulations of fieldwork in an elitist hierarchic setting whose agents viewed, on the whole, my intellectual position as “where the rubber meets the sky,” and treated me accordingly; and the particular issues raised—I felt at the time, and still do today—by my Israeli background and the distinct vantage point it created for me: a sort of reverse anthropologist, studying the center and the bastions of its power from the periphery. Thus, the book ends with a personal tale, for better and for worse, hinting at the biases, limitations, and personal preferences that contributed to the book’s agenda, conceptual framework, and ideological position.

What kinds of tales, then, does the book tell? The author is perhaps not the best authority on this matter: his interests, like his limitations, are quite obvious. But since asked, and since no other authority is necessarily better placed to answer such questions, I would suggest that first and foremost, *Engineering Culture* is a realistic tale (with a distinct moralistic flavor) of corporate control and its unanticipated consequences, and should be judged in these terms. If it is a story well told, the matter, as far as I’m concerned, may rest there: the trendy rhetorics of postmodernism notwithstanding, there is no shame (and some pride) in “big questions” taken seriously and straightforwardly, indeed scientifically. However, beyond this tale, for those who care to look, there are, I believe, glimpses of others: my own reading suggests that *Engineering Culture* is also a story of the moral career of my own conceptual apparatus—how, to what end, and with what results, culture “goes native”—and a (self) critical examination of the involvement, unwitting or not, of my own professional community in shaping the phenomena we study.

Finally, there is, perhaps, also an allegorical tale: how individuals can and do live with all-encompassing ideologies that attempt to shape collectives and make heavy, and potentially dangerous, demands on their members; far fetched, perhaps, but of interest, I suspect to those, who like Israelis of my generation, were raised in the shadow of deeply demanding, overt ideological constructions and who might be interested in protecting themselves from their claims.

On matters of textual interpretation, it is the readers, of course, who must ultimately assume authority: the last word is theirs. It is up to such readers, having been given fair warning of my biases, partaken of a reasonable (albeit selective) range of my observations and interpretations, and armed, one hopes, with their own relevant experiences, to decide whether and to what extent all of this is interesting and convincing. And it is for them to make of it what tale they will.

## The Style and Structure of *Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives*

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### Writing as a Struggle for Intellectual Dominance

Organizational culture is a topic that has brought to the surface fundamental theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and political disagreements. Such disagreements could be fruitful for this topic area and for the field of organizational studies, more broadly defined. Unfortunately, all too often, disagreements among cultural researchers take the form of a debate about which theory or method is the “one best way”: an open or unspoken struggle for intellectual dominance. When opposing points of view clash openly, assumptions are laid bare and declared unwarranted or foolish and alternate viewpoints are dismissed as misguided, empirically unfounded, or irrelevant to more important questions. In other kinds of papers, only a careful reading between the lines reveals the silencing of opposing points of view, as assumptions remain unstated or unchallenged and opposing points of view are omitted, marginalized in a footnote or an aside, or declared outside the paper’s focus. If culture were a topic area where quantitative methods were used by all, and if these disagreements were purely theoretical, a classic experiment or comprehensive archival study might be able to prove, conclusively, that a particular argument is false. However, because so much culture research is qualitative, such definitive empirical answers are unlikely, and so the culture debates become even less tolerant of opposing views.

*Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives* (Martin 1992) is an attempt to find alternative ways of writing about culture that are more tolerant—even expressive of—opposing views. The discussion below<sup>1</sup> focuses first on theoretical writing, then on writing about qualitative data, and concludes with ways of creating polyphonic cultural texts.

### Seeking an Alternative Way to Write about Theory

The book begins with a short, fierce debate among prototypical cultural researchers, illustrating how fights for dominance impede deeper intellectual exchange. In the rest of the book, the rules of intellectual discourse are less like a struggle for dominance and more like a conversation. The parties to this conversation are the three conflicting theoretical perspectives that have come to dominate the cultural literature. The first of these three viewpoints is an Integration perspective that sees cultures in terms of shared values: harmony, homogeneity, and organization-wide consensus. (To the extent that conflicting meanings, subcultures, and ambiguities are discussed, they are “sideshows” to the main event or dismissed, as not part of the culture). The second is the Differentiation perspective, which focuses on inconsistencies (for example between es-