

## Contingency of Organizational Culture Perspectives การใช้แนวทางแบบ Contingency ในเรื่องวัฒนธรรมองค์การ

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้เป็นการเสนอแนวทางในการจัดการกับความขัดแย้งในแนวคิดเรื่องวัฒนธรรมองค์การโดยใช้วิธีการแบบ Contingency บทความนี้จะศึกษาเฉพาะแนวคิดที่เป็นกระแสหลักในทฤษฎีองค์การ คือ แนวคิดที่มองวัฒนธรรมองค์การเป็นเสมือนตัวแปรหนึ่งหรือระบบย่อยอันหนึ่งในองค์การ (Functionalism) และแนวคิดที่มองวัฒนธรรมองค์การเป็นเรื่องกระบวนการสร้างความหมายต่าง ๆ ทางสังคม (Interpretivism) ทั้งสองแนวคิดมีสมมติฐาน และแนวคิดที่แตกต่างกัน บทความนี้จึงได้เสนอข้อแตกต่างดังกล่าวและพยายามใช้วิธีการแบบ Contingency เพื่อเป็นแนวทางเบื้องต้นในการแสวงหาว่าแนวคิดทั้งสองจะมีความเหมาะสมในการประยุกต์ใช้ในสถานการณ์ใด ทั้งนี้เพื่อประโยชน์ในการทำวิจัยในเรื่องวัฒนธรรมองค์การในอนาคตต่อไป

### Abstract

This article presents an alternative way in dealing with the contradiction of organizational culture perspectives by using the principle of contingency. The contingency of organizational culture perspectives in this article is based on two major paradigms: functionalism and interpretivism. In order to clarify the paradigm contrasts, this article points out the differences and connections. Then, the article suggests that each paradigm is appropriate to the situation according to the characteristics of subject matter of the organizational culture study.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of "culture" has been borrowed from anthropology, where there is no consensus on its meaning (Smircich, 1983). The 164 definitions of culture cited by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) together encompass a whole range of components: knowledge, values, preferences, habits, customs, traditional practices, behavior, and artifacts. Such fragmented definitions not only indicate that there is no agreement on the meaning of the term, they also create difficulties in defining the boundaries of a cultural unit (Child, 1981). Not surprisingly, there is also a variety of approaches of culture in organizational studies (Martin & Meyerson, 1988; Ott, 1989; Schein, 1990; Smircich & Calas, 1987; Van Maanen, 1988). However, this paper will consider the current major perspectives of organizational culture and suggest a possible future research direction that may be pursued through these perspectives.

### PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Despite various meanings of culture, there are some common characteristics of culture, which most organizational theorists will probably agree on:

(1) culture emerges from the *interactions* of people within a society, or an organization;

(2) culture is *shared* among the members of a group;

(3) culture is *learned, constructed,*

and *transmitted* among people; and

(4) culture incorporates *artifacts* and *symbolic* elements.

The main current concept of culture in organizational research can be classified into two major themes: culture as a variable and culture as a root metaphor (Smircich, 1983; Meek, 1988; Smircich, et al., 1987) (see Table 1). The first theme can be classified as functionalism, whereas the latter one can be categorized as interpretivism<sup>1</sup> (Smircich, et al., 1987). A comparison of these two perspectives on culture will be discussed as follows:

#### *Culture as a Variable* (Functionalism)

The perspective on culture as a variable includes cross-culture and corporate culture research (Smircich, 1983). The cross-cultural or comparative management had first come to attention when multinational corporations and government agencies encountered difficulty in transplanting U.S. management techniques to other countries. Practitioners in government as well as businesses started questioning the applicability of U.S. management practices to overseas locations. At this stage, culture was considered something synonymous with nations, an *external* contingency variable that influenced the choice of appropriate management practice. This perspective attempts to find the similarities and differences among cultural patterns in a sizable sample of societies. It

conceptualized culture as an important *environmental variable* over which an organization had very little control.

The notion of culture as an *internal variable* originated when scholars began to contrast the management of Japanese and American enterprises; they claimed that organizational culture accounted for the success of an organization to a degree greater than other facets of the organizational system (cf. Ouchi, 1981). This view also stresses on the leader role in managing culture (Schein, 1985; 1990).

The perspective of culture as a variable views culture as social or normative glue that holds an organization together (Baker, 1980; Tichy, 1982). In other words, culture is a consensus on something and is used to be a normative value judgement for a group. For instance, Schein (1991) defines culture as the '*valid*' or '*correct*' way to deal with problems. According to Schein (1991:248), "if there is no consensus, or if there is conflict or if things are ambiguous, then, by definition, that group does not have a culture in regard to those things."

**Table 1 Comparison of Two Major Themes on Culture**

	Functionalism	Interpretivism
Major themes	Culture as a variable	Culture as root metaphor
Themes in O&M research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-cultural or comparative management</li> <li>• Corporate culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational cognition</li> <li>• Organizational symbolism</li> <li>• Unconscious processes and organization</li> </ul>
Metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Something an organization has</li> <li>• Social glue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Something an organization is</li> <li>• Network of meanings</li> </ul>
Concepts of culture	Culture is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shared key values and beliefs;</li> <li>• social or normative glue that holds an organization together</li> </ul>	Culture is a system of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shared knowledge, shared beliefs;</li> <li>• shared symbols and meanings;</li> <li>• reflection and manifestations of unconscious processes</li> </ul>
Research agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the relationship between culture and organizational structure?</li> <li>• What are the similarities and differences in attitudes of managers of different cultures?</li> <li>• How to mold and shape internal culture in particular ways?</li> <li>• How to change culture to be consistent with managerial purposes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the structures of knowledge?</li> <li>• What are the 'rules' that guide action?</li> <li>• How to document the creation and maintenance of organizations through symbolic action?</li> <li>• What problems are solved by such persistent patterns in organizational arrangement as hierarchy?</li> <li>• What do the patterns of organization reveal about the human mind?</li> </ul>

Source: Smircich (1983).

One contribution of this perspective is to bring cultural issues to the interests of organizational scholars. In addition, the culture from this perspective focuses on the consensus meaning among members of a group, which is helpful for comparison study across nations.

However, the argument is that this perspective concentrates only on consensus and dominant culture, there is no room for differences and ambiguity in culture (Martin and Meyerson, 1987, 1988; Meyerson, 1991). In addition, culture from this definition is treated as a collective will or consciousness of an organization for the purpose of harmony (Meek, 1988). This is why Martin and Meyerson (1987) called this perspective an "Integration" perspective. The aspect of subcultures in a nation or an organization is much neglected in this approach. This perspective believes that a "strong" organizational culture is the key to organizational excellence and can be changed (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982). Nevertheless, some other researchers questioned whether culture is manageable (Smircich, 1983; Weick, 1983) as this approach suggested, especially when culture is conceptualized as an organization.

#### *Culture as a Root Metaphor* (Interpretivism)

The interpretive approach considers culture as a new paradigm (Smircich, 1983), or an analytical lens (Louis, 1985), or a way of seeing organizations (Morgan, 1986). That is, organizations can be understood and analyzed in terms of

their expressive and symbolic aspects. This perspective also shows how people in different groups shape and construct the meanings through symbols and other expressive artifacts (Weick, 1979). Therefore, it suggests the process of social construction of different cultures, which is beneficial for the application in a multi-cultural group or organization (cf. Cox, 1991) or among technical professionals (cf. Van Maanen, 1991). Since this perspective is more concerned about deep-rooted and unconscious cultures, it argues that organizational culture cannot be or is difficult to be managed (Martin, 1985; Weick, 1983). Therefore, the application of this perspective is on the understanding of the process in shaping culture rather than managing culture as of the first perspective.

Martin and Meyerson (1988) extend the scope of this perspective by classifying it into two categories: differentiation and fragmentation approaches. From the differentiation approach, consensus emerges only within the boundaries of a subculture. At the organizational level of analysis, each subculture may co-exist in harmony; however, it may be in conflict with other subcultures (Frost et al., 1991). These conflicts may be attributed to the differences in professional, gender, class, race, and organizational status.

According to the fragmentation approach, ambiguity can arise from lack of clarity or from multiple meanings or beliefs. This approach is developed from the 'garbage can' model (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972) and is consistent with

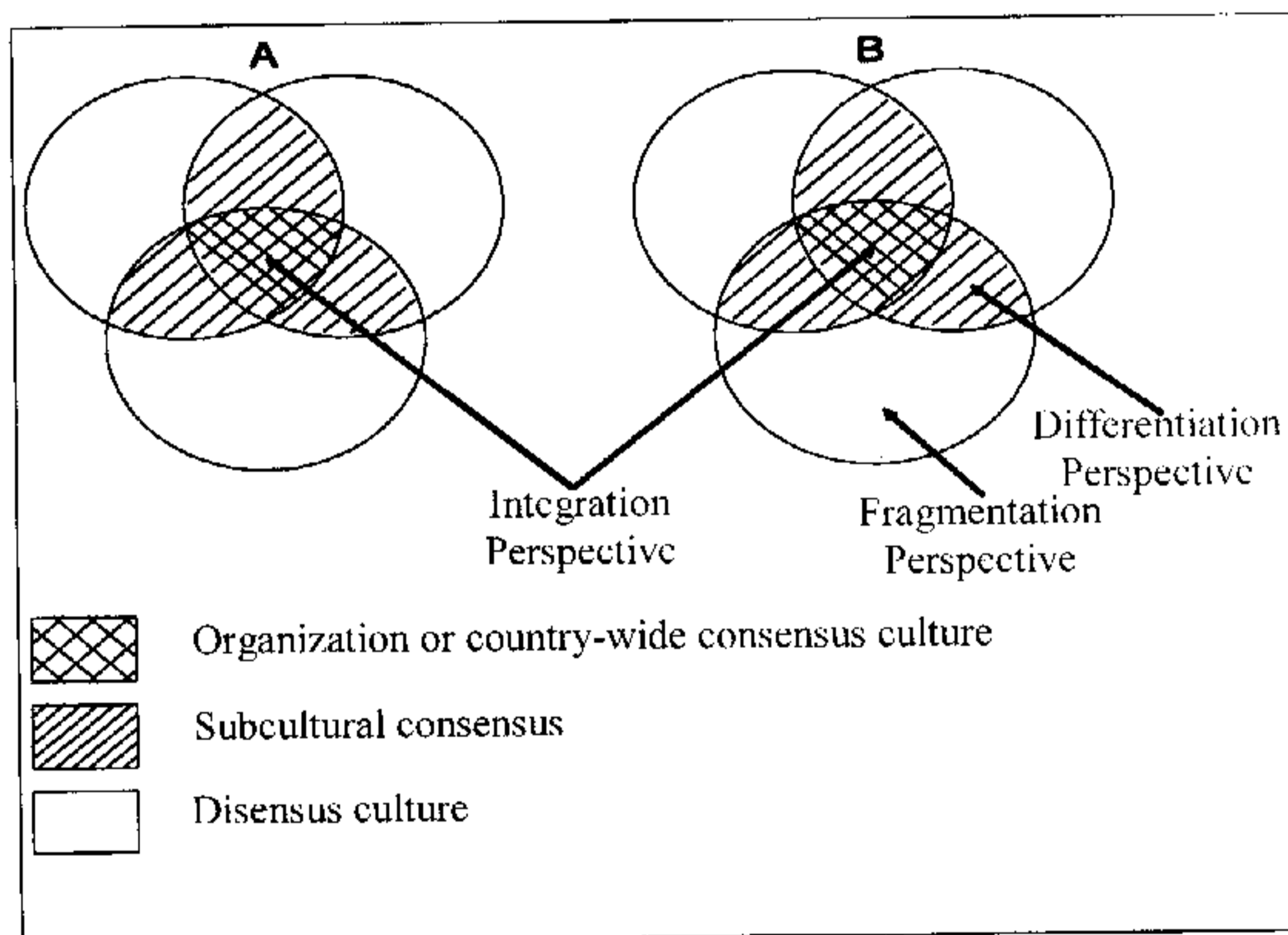
'double bind organizations' (Hennestad, 1990) where conflicting messages occur. Some examples of ambiguity culture had been given in a study of hospital social workers (Meyerson, 1991), a study of decision making at the Tenerife Airport (Weick, 1991), and a study of social work (Feldman, 1991).

**CONTINGENCY OF CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

From my point of view, the differences of cultural perspectives can be understood from their areas of interest or

their boundary of research (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows culture as a variable or integration perspective that focuses on the overlap of beliefs or shared beliefs for the whole unit of study. The overlap of circles represents shared cultures and is used for comparison study. In particular, cross-culture research stresses on studying the dominant shared beliefs for the whole country (unit) and comparing to other countries (units); whereas corporate culture underscores the shared beliefs for the whole organization.

**Figure 1 The Focus of Cultural Perspectives**



On the other hand, the culture as a root metaphor perspective focuses on studying culture as a whole. The overlap between subgroups can be subcultures, which may be different or contradictory to each other. However, the areas that do not overlap represent the ambiguities, which are the center of interest of the fragmentation perspective.

Due to the different cultural perspectives, this paper suggests a contingency approach (Morgan, 1983) to be an alternative tool in conducting research. In Table 2, the three cultural perspectives described in this paper are presented along with five relevant dimensions of the unit of study.

**Table 2 Contingency of Cultural Perspectives**

Dimensions	Functionalism	Interpretivism	
	Integration	Differentiation	Fragmentation
Focus	Organization or country-wide consensus	Subcultural consensus	Lack of consensus
Unit of study:	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous	Diverse and disordered.
• Characteristic			
• Goals	Consistent	Consistent within subcultures	Unclear, ambiguous
• Power	Centralized	Moderately decentralized	Very decentralized
• Standardization	High	Medium	Low
• Crises or new problems	Very few or almost none	Some	Many

It is suggested that the integration perspective is suitable when the unit of study is homogeneous so that it is highly possible to have consensus in the whole unit. In addition, the goals should be consistent because the members of organizations may have shared objectives, which the members would accept and follow. In this case, power is centralized to control the practices in an organization.

Standardization is high in order to predetermine the actions of members. Additionally, there are only a few or almost no crises or new problems. The homogeneous organization culture evolves when all members of an organization face the same problems and when each member adopts a common set of understanding for enacting proper and consensually approved behavior (Van Mannen and Barley, 1984).

The differentiation perspective is suitable when the unit of study is heterogeneous, e.g., multi-cultural organizations, status-differentiated groups (Skovovetz, 1988), multi-professional organizations, and multi-functional organizations. Organizational goals are consistent within sub-cultures or subgroups. That is, under this situation, each group will have collective beliefs or understanding. In addition, each group will identify itself as a distinct group within the organization (Van Mannen and Barley, 1984). Power is moderately decentralized and standardization is medium. Also, there are some crises or new problems. These new problems will lead to different interpretation or different understanding among groups.

Finally, since the fragmentation perspective does not focus on shared expression (Frost, et al., 1991), it is appropriate when the unit of study is diverse and disordered. The goals are unclear or ambiguous. Power is very decentralized so that each member must make his or her own decision. Also, standardization is low, and there is

no clear definition and boundary of the functions. Furthermore, there are many crises or new problems. When organizations face many new problems, it is difficult for them to create the collective understanding for solutions to meet specific problems posed by the situation. This is especially true when the members have no shared understanding and construe the problem in different ways (cf. Weick, 1991).

### CONCLUSION

The contingency approach suggested in this paper was developed in terms of functionalist and interpretive paradigms within the domain of organizational culture studies. Instead of treating the contrasts of the two paradigms as paradoxes and attempting to solve them, this contingency perspective is a novel approach to generate new forms of understanding and conducting organizational cultural research. The main consideration of this approach is on the fit between the cultural perspectives and the dimensions of the unit of study in combination.

### FOOT NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The paradigm diversity of organization theory was mapped by Burrell and Morgan (1978) who claimed that there are at least four paradigms defining the field of organizational sociology: functionalism, interpretivism, radical humanism, and radical structuralism. Each paradigm represents different assumptions on reality, grounds of knowledge, relationship between human beings and their environment, and methodology.

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