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## **Why management studies need the organizational ethnographer**

Jeroen Vermeulen and Michel van Slobbe

Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University

In our contribution to this book we would like to make some reflections on the tension between culture and management as it appears in the field of organizational anthropology. We are challenged by the anthropologist Allen Batteau (2001) who asks us to make a moral choice between studying culture represented by those socialized into the ethos of instrumental rationality, and interrogating instrumental rationality as outside, critical, creative voices. Our point of departure in this chapter will be a short examination of two Dutch academic settings where the combination of culture and management took shape in teaching, research and consultancy, notably the department of anthropology and the center for policy and management studies of Utrecht University. We will argue that the change from the anthropology department to the center for policy and management studies as the institutional base of ‘organizational anthropology’ caused changes in both the content and the methodology of the study of organizational culture. Then, we will go into the relationship between culture and management from the vantage point of organizational ethnography. Following Bate (1997), we will discuss the issues of history, context and process. We think that the best way to deal with the choice Batteau confronts us with, is to take seriously an ethnographic approach to culture and management, which takes its point of departure in the

locality and complexity of the mundane in organizations, as expressed in cultivated forms (rituals, symbols, stories, objects, language) that make up a culture.

We consider ourselves second-generation-organization-anthropologists in the Netherlands, having worked in the same academic departments as Willem Koot, one of the pioneers of the field of organizational anthropology in the Netherlands. If indeed there is something like organizational culture that is shared and that is transmittable, then surely we are influenced by the ideas and working practices that Koot created in these institutions.

*If you cannot join them, leave them*

The study of organizational culture in the Netherlands was generated from within the margins of the department of cultural anthropology in Utrecht. As a new field of study, organizational anthropology had to position itself within the traditional fields of cultural anthropology in Utrecht. The pioneers were not very successful in that respect, for organization or management as locus of study was not included by the 'regulars'. Instead, slowly organizational anthropology moved away and searched its own locus and focus.

The curriculum was build up by the traditional region focused (Asia, Africa and Latin America) courses. The subject of organization anthropology was only half-heartedly mentioned to students during information sessions. As a specialisation subject starting in the third year, it was chosen by only a small number of students. As the job perspectives for anthropologists were not too bright, some students were attracted to organization culture because it seemed to extend their possibilities, the concept of culture being a commercial success for consultancy firms.

The lecturers were mainly hired from other institutions (for example the center for policy and management studies) or were teaching the subject as a side-issue of interest. The central concepts on organization culture for teaching and debate within the department consisted of the 'three-perspective' approach (Martin 1992, Frost et al 1991), the focus on the informal

and tacit dimension of organizations (Koot & Hogema 1992), and culture as a framework for meaning and sense making in organizations. As a methodological book *The Grounded Theory* (Strauss & Corbin 1990) was being deployed besides more traditional anthropological works as *The Ethnographic Interview* (Spradley 1979) and *Ethnographic Research* (Ellen 1984). An important 'other' concept on organization culture was *Culture's Consequences* (Hofstede 1980), rejected by the lecturers and desired by the students for its functionalist and objectivist approach. The main input from the field of management practice was coming from consultants and managers. Mostly, they discussed questions of culture's potential as an instrument for intervention (change management), and the use of cultural analyses for organizational identity purposes or insights for improving management practice. Organization anthropology within the department was looked upon as not belonging to the discipline of anthropology, because of two reasons: it was studying dominant structures and power positions (in terms of Laura Nader: 'studying up'), which were morally rejected by most anthropologists who favored the 'underdog'; moreover its objects of study, namely public and private organizations, were located in the Netherlands (the West, First World) and not in the so called Third World countries. In this spirit against the study of culture and management, Koot (1995) brings up the Camelot project<sup>1</sup> as an explanation for the study these issues being *non grata* within traditional anthropology. Eventually, it was decided to leave the department and to create a new home base in the center for policy and management studies. This decision had important consequences for the work in the area of organizational anthropology. The relation with the discipline of anthropology and its emphasis on ethnographic methods weakened. At the same time the influence of management thinking and organizational consultancy on the issues studied and the methodology used increased.

#### *Management in the center of attention*

From the beginning of the nineties onwards, the study of organizational culture and management got a certain degree of autonomy and status within the context of the center for policy and management that it missed within the department of anthropology. It became a

legitimate field of academic practice. This was also supported by the growth of the field internationally. The book by Joanne Martin (1992) about the three-perspective approach was the main source of inspiration. Ties with cultural anthropology were more or less cut off, and the relation between both institutions became antagonistic.

The management perspective and interventionist assumptions underlying this perspective gradually became the unquestioned base for studying organizational culture. “Culture, in this paradigm, is viewed most generously as a meaning system that blocks or facilitates organizational success” (Smith, 1993: 420). Martin’s book adds to this paradigm, for, as Vicky Smith (1993: 420) remarked, it “fail[s] to move away from their predescriptive underpinnings and their emphasis on changing cultures and organizations for particular ends” (ibid). Moreover, there is serious danger of reifying Martin’s three perspectives in studying organizational culture and writing about it, which makes the framework even more vulnerable for unreflective and unspoken interventionist goals.

### *Culture and meaning*

From our description of the study of management and organizational culture within the two institutions mentioned above we would like to elicit two related tendencies. First, the move away from anthropology, and second, the gradual replacement of the concept of culture by the concept of meaning. Let’s take a look at these points in more detail.

Some authors (cf. Smith 1993; Smircich, 1983; Yanow 2000) describe and argue for a distinction between the study of organizational culture and the cultural study of organizations. They argue in favor of the latter, for such an approach would be in line with interpretative approaches that focus on processes of meaning-making in organizations. The first approach can be said to see ‘culture’ as a variable in organizations (Martin, 2002: 4) on a par with other aspects of organizations like ‘structure’, ‘technology’ and ‘personnel’. This approach assumes a functional viewpoint that contains the promise to managers of maximizing organizational outcomes via the manipulation of culture. The functionalist approach to culture and management has been under attack (see esp. Parker, 2000). Although we sympathize with the

line of thinking behind the ‘cultural approach’, we think that there is some danger of dismissing the concept of culture as an ‘object’ and replacing it with the more general term of meaning and meaning-making. Meaning is not a distinctive term (what can be said to be *outside the domain of meaning?*). Moreover, a focus on meaning could lead to a cognitivism and subjectivism that neglects material and action-oriented sides of culture in organizations. We will come to the methodological consequences of such a choice later. This thinking also has consequences for the relation between culture and management. Talking about and working with culture solely in terms of meaning will neglect the side of praxis that makes (the study of) the relation between culture and management interesting and valuable. Instead, culture can be seen as a toolkit for action (Swidler, 1986), and thus generate action potential for management as well, without falling into the trap of managerialism. Culture cannot be substituted with ‘just’ meaning; culture is also ‘form’. It consists of the cultivated forms of a group (stories, symbols, rituals, stylized actions) that, by way of their artifactual character, can be interpreted, transmitted, studied, changed and acted upon (see Weick, 1995; Batteau, 2001). Management of meaning, without culture in this sense, is swimming on dry land, or even floating in the air. There are three aspects of an ethnographic approach to culture and management that we want to point out here, which emphasize the importance of taking the view of culture as a toolkit of cultivated forms. Avoiding the trap of managerialist thinking of culture – and thus avoiding, as Batteau said, studying culture as represented by the ethos of instrumental rationality – such an approach, following Bate (1997) would have to be historical, contextual and processual. We will illustrate our discussion with material from an ethnographic study of the construction of identity at a Dutch school for higher vocational education (Vermeulen, 2001).

#### *Looking for the past in the present*

As Bate (1997: 1155) states, management studies are not inclined to be ‘historically-minded’. Management is pre-occupied with the future, not even with the present, let alone the past. Management is about making plans, about stating missions for the future of organizations,

and about visions that reach beyond existing horizons. In the same vein, the management of the Dutch school for higher vocational education, named 'Windesheim', uses the metaphor of a journey to describe and legitimize changes in the organization and to persuade teaching personnel and middle management to join in as fellow-travellers. They wrote a lengthy strategic document that was given the title 'A Journey'; the title provided the leading metaphor throughout the text (see for an analysis Vermeulen, 2005).

Bate (1997: 1155) cites a beautiful concept of Malinowsky in order to make clear the anthropologist's stance towards studying the past: anthropologists would focus on the 'living history' of the organization under scrutiny. In fact, culture *is* living history. Studying practices and artifacts, like rituals, metaphors, stories, that give form and meaning to culture would capture diachronic meanings displayed in synchronic action. The past is to be studied in the everyday actions and objects that can be conceptualised as routine, ritual or symbolic. An example from the context the Dutch school (Vermeulen, 2001) would be the following. A meeting was organised between the management team (on faculty level) and the team of teachers of the department of Theology. Topic of discussion between them was the status and identity of this small department in the context of the faculty of Education and in the context of a reorganization of the faculty. This meeting is an organizational ritual where the differing views between the MT and the teachers are played out. The meeting provides a ritual form that on the one hand gives legitimacy to existence of conflicting views and on the other hand mitigates a potential conflict between the two parties. An analysis of the meeting as a ritual can shed light on the power relations that have been developed through time between the parties and between individual members. Moreover, it can provide insight in the very concrete way in which culture stagnates or helps organizational change. At the same, an approach that historicizes cultural practices in organizations in this manner zooms in at management actions and their consequences, and is thus critical *per se*.

### *Putting things in context*

Thought and behavior must be understood in the context in which they are situated. Context can refer to the temporal, physical or institutional embeddings of focal events or objects (see Bate, 1997: 1156). An approach to the management of culture that aims at studying the intervention of organizational behaviour and processes has to be sensitive to the contextualization of that action. In order to be able to take a critical stance towards management actions, we suggest that the starting point for investigation should not lie in the generality and ubiquity of the notion of context, but instead should lie in a thorough analysis of the local cultural practices and objects *and* the way these enact their context (cf. Weick, 1995). The process of contextualization, or enactment for that matter, is a process whereby the relation between a figure and its ground disappears from surface. Enactment is thus about tacit assumptions in the construction of meaning, that need to be made explicit through in-depth analysis of cultural forms in order to gain critical insight in the workings and consequences of intervention.

There is a methodological side to this, pointed out by Bate (1997), but also by Barley and Kunda (2001) more recently. Increasingly, research into the meanings of management and the management of meaning gives prominence to interviewing as a method over (participative) observation. This is due to the focus on meaning in management studies, detached (or indeed only seemingly so) from its cultural forms. We subscribe to the following observation, made by Barley and Kunda (ibid: 81): “Although useful for studying points of view and meaning, such techniques [interviews] are less adequate for studying work because most (.) practices are so contextualized that people often cannot articulate how they do what they do, unless they are in the process of doing it”. We take this position to mean that only by observing and analyzing organizational action – i.e. the concrete form meanings take –we can get an understanding of, the often implicit (and thus ideologically imbued), the contextualization of thought and behavior (a point corroborated recently by Tope et al., 2005). This point leads us, finally, to the next issue that Bate addresses in describing the characteristics of ethnographic research in organizations, namely its orientation to process (1997: 1158).

### *The fluidity of process*

Already in 1992 Willem Koot said that an anthropological perspective on organizations would focus on the informal aspects of organizations. Or, better: the focus would be on the interactions between formal characteristics of organizations (goals, tasks, structure) and the informal sense members make of these aspects and negotiate in their everyday actions. As Bate (ibid) points out, the informal process of negotiating formal aspects is the 'contested terrain' upon which different interests, points of view and ideologies in organizations are played out. It seems to us that an ethnographic orientation to cultural forms and practices on a very local level is the only way to obtain insight in the complexity – the fluidity even – of these processes. Moreover, a cultural analysis of these processes cannot but reveal the limits of an instrumental-rational view on management. Unexpected ambiguous processes that are situated in unexpected places, in unexpected forms, often trigger organizational change. We want to illustrate the processual, often fragmented and contradictory, character of meaning and change in the case of the Dutch school for higher vocational education (Vermeulen, 2001). We will take the reader to the central canteen of school.

When one enters the doors of the main building of the school, one sees the "central canteen" right in front. It is an open space in which various activities take place and which is full of heterogeneous objects: the reception of the school, the dining place, a cafeteria, a central place for chairs and tables, the "silence center" ("*stiltecentrum* ") of the student parish, a place for playing table football and table tennis, a selling-point for office-equipment, readers and copy machines. The place as a whole was originally intended as a multifunctional space. The first chairman of the school favored the idea of using the space for all sorts of communal activities, including the organization of religious services. The Christian identity of the school formed the inspiration for the architectural design of the "central canteen." A series of eleven paintings hang on the circular wall of the "central canteen," in a circle. The artwork as a whole is called *Alpha and Omega; Jacob and the Angel?* The "silence center" of the student parish form both beginning and ending point of the circle of painting. It is a small chapel

placed inside the canteen. The silence center is freely accessible and meant to serve as a public space for small groups and individuals who want to retreat for short moments of meditation. (The title of the artwork refers to the biblical story in Genesis (32:22-32) about the wrestling between Jacob and an unknown man during the night before Jacob's renewed confrontation with his brother Esau. After the fight, in the early morning, the man blesses Jacob. He is given a new name: Israēl, which means literally "he who fights with God."). The circle of paintings and the centrality of the silence center were intended to impose a certain religiously inspired order on the meaning and use of the "central canteen," located in what was originally, unambiguously, the central building of the school. Yet, this order, or this intention to order, has changed over the years. The circle of paintings is still in its place, as is the "silence center." But now Coca Cola and Mars vending machines and commercial posters and advertisements are placed between, and sometimes in front of, the paintings. The circle has been broken. A few meters away from the silence center the bright and colourful cafeteria called *Jack and Judy's* has been built, where cappuccino and strolls are being served by young happy people dressed in gay uniforms, and where students of the school are consuming pints of good beer.

In a material as well as in a symbolic sense the centrality of the "silence center" in the canteen of the school has been encroached upon by the juxtaposition of the new commercial cafeteria. The ordering of the "central canteen" has become "heterotopic": "an ordering that takes place through a juxtaposition of signs that culturally are seen as not going together, either because their relationship is new or because it is unexpected" (Hetherington 1997: 9). The juxtaposition of cafeteria and silence center, and of religious paintings and advertisements creates a fragmented order, which shows the meaning of Christian identity in the organisation to be highly contested.

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<sup>1</sup> American anthropologists misleadingly were asked to study the cultures of ethnic groups in order to collect data about revolutionary potential for the CIA.