



# The fact and fantasy of organizational culture management: a case study of Greek food retailing

Lloyd C. Harris\*, Georgios Metallinos

*Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK*

## Abstract

The management, manipulation or interference in organizational culture has become central to many theories and prescriptions of management. However, despite frequent prescriptions to manage culture in diverse national contexts, little empirical evidence has been forwarded in contexts other than the UK and the US. The current study is designed to overcome the limitations of existing studies through the critical review of culture management in a novel context—in this case, Greek food retailing. The aim is to provide empirical evidence regarding the fact and fantasy of Hellenic culture management. The paper begins with a brief overview of organizational culture literature and in particular culture management studies. After an explanation of the research design and methodology adopted, the analysis of a culture change effort study is presented and discussed. Four main findings emerge regarding: (1) the context of the change, (2) the espoused and perceived rationale for culture management, (3) the nature and process of the change programme and (4) the perceived impact of these changes on the organisation and its members. The paper culminates with a series of conclusions and implications of interest to both theorists and practitioners. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

It is arguable that the notion of organizational culture constitutes the most elusive and yet tantalising concept for both management theorists and practitioners. Indeed, whilst many early studies assume that organizational culture is merely another variable subject to the vagaries of executive whims (see for example Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982), contemporary theorists raise conceptual objections and cite pragmatic difficulties which undermine early functionalist views (see Willmott, 1993; Legge, 1994; Ogbonna and Harris, 1998).

Nevertheless, the management, manipulation or interference in organizational culture has become central to many theories and prescriptions of management. Indeed, in addition to the discipline of human resource management, numerous fields have adopted, incorporated and advocated culture management. For example, marketers posit that successful culture management determines the extent to which the ‘philosophy’

of marketing (the marketing concept) is implemented (Narver et al., 1998; Harris and Ogbonna, 1999). Likewise, strategists have claimed that sustainable change pivots on appropriate culture change (Post and Altman, 1994; Welford, 1995) whilst supply chain management is littered with exhortations to manage culture (for example Abell, 1999). Further, organizational culture management is vociferously prescribed for diverse sectors ranging from health care (Huq and Martin, 2000) to auto-motor manufacturing (Dove, 1998) as well as diverse contexts ranging from Russia (Fey et al., 1999) to New Zealand (Parry, 2000).

However, despite frequent prescriptions to manage organizational culture in diverse national contexts (see Fey et al., 1999; Parry, 2000), little empirical evidence has been forwarded in contexts other than the UK and the US. The gap in extant knowledge is such that a number of theorists have called for additional empirical research into organizational culture management in novel contexts (see for example Ogbonna and Harris, 1998). The current study is specifically designed to overcome the limitations of existing studies through the critical examination of organizational culture management in a (comparatively) novel context—in this case, Greek food retailing. The aim is to provide rich

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44-(0)29-2087-5066; fax: +44-(0)29-2087-4419.

*E-mail address:* harrisl1@cardiff.ac.uk (L.C. Harris).

empirical evidence regarding the fact and fantasy of Hellenic culture management.

The paper begins with a brief overview of organizational culture literature and in particular culture management studies. After an explanation of the research design and methodology adopted, the analysis of a culture change effort study is presented and discussed. The paper culminates with a series of conclusions and implications of interest to both theorists and practitioners.

## 2. Examining organizational culture

In order more to fully appreciate the complexities of organizational culture management, it is first worthwhile elucidating the concept of culture. Given, space restrictions, this is most parsimoniously achieved through a brief overview of the more common perspectives, typologies and conceptualisations of culture.

While numerous categorisations of culture perspectives have been forwarded (see Smircich, 1983; Schultz and Hatch, 1996), it has been argued that the work of Martin (1992) constitutes the most interesting contribution (Harris and Ogbonna, 1998a). In contrast to the classification of Smircich (1983), which emphasises the distinction between culture as something an organization *has* and as something an organization *is*, Martin (1992) identifies three perspectives of culture, namely: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. Briefly, these perspectives differ in their orientation to consensus, relations amongst manifestations and orientation to ambiguity.

The extent of variation between developed perspectives accounts for the diversity of cultural typologies. Indeed, Brown (1995, p. 67) argues that the typologies that have been developed differ greatly “in terms of their sophistication, the range of variables they take into consideration and their applicability across organizations”. Harrison (1972) identifies four organizational ‘ideologies’: power, role, task, and person, which Handy (1985) later describes as culture types. In contrast, Deal and Kennedy (1982) forward four types of cultures, determined by the degree of risk associated with the company’s activities and the speed of decision and strategy making feedback. Quinn and McGrath (1985) detect four generic cultures (rational, ideological, consensual and hierarchical cultures), each of which has different assumptions and values. However, it is the work of Scholz (1987) that provides the most comprehensive categorisation. Briefly, Scholz (1987) argues that through analysing the internal, external and evolution-induced dimensions, numerous common culture types may be identified.

Finally, it is expedient to highlight the more common conceptualisations of organizational culture. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the remit of this review and it is pertinent to note that innumerable opinions on culture exist. However, it is generally accepted that organizational cultures are typically pluralistic (Sackmann, 1992), are characterised by varying degrees of order and consensus (Martin, 1992) and comprise deep layers of basic assumptions and shallower layers of beliefs and artefacts (which some claim are too shallow to constitute ‘culture’—see Schein, 1992).

## 3. Organizational culture management

The character of organizational culture management has been portrayed in different ways by different authors. Siehl (1985, p. 139), for example, defines managing culture as “articulating a possible culture, coming to agree that it is desirable, and then attaining it through the sharing of desired values”. In contrast, Ogbonna (1993, p. 8) notes that managing culture does not necessarily equate to cultural change and may include “creating it, changing it, maintaining it and abandoning it”. Conversely, the critical view of Anthony (1990, p. 4) is that culture management often entails “an attempted repackaging of managerial expertise, rather than any advance of understanding or control”. These views reflect the previously discussed perspectives on organizational culture in that theories of organizational culture management may be divided into two broad categories. Firstly, writers which reject the concept of conscious cultural management (for example, Anthony, 1990; Legge, 1994) and secondly studies which argue that some manipulation (Martin, 1985) or even management of culture (Bate, 1995) is possible. These two positions deserve greater discussion.

The first stance regarding culture management posits the view that whilst cultures do gradually change over time, the notion that management are able consciously to direct culture is a fallacy (Knights and Willmott, 1987; Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Legge, 1994). These theorists often reject the culture-variable perspective in favour of what Martin (1985) labels ‘purist’ culture definitions and perspectives. This position often presents culture as a concept deeply embedded at an unconscious level and thus untouchable by management intervention techniques. Indeed, a number of theorists have suggested that many culture change programmes merely manipulate the tangible manifestations of culture at the artefact level and fail to reach the deeper, unconscious assumptions of ‘true’ organizational culture (see Anthony, 1990; Legge, 1994). These arguments lead Ogbonna and Harris (1998) to note that the perspective and conceptualisation adopted by the researcher

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