

# A General Behavior Model and New Definitions of Organizational Cultures

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## Abstract

Current definitions of organization/corporate cultures overemphasize long-run equilibrium and underplay short-run dynamics; they stress commonalities and overlook diversities, underscore emic analyses and lose sights of etic analyses, and separate the intangible from the tangible; plus are “model unfriendly.” As an alternative approach addressing these problems, we propose a new General Behavioral Model (GBM) and then derive two new definitions of OC that view organizational cultures as [1] *accumulated choices* and [2] *interactions among critical masses of people*. Theoretical characteristics and managerial implications are discussed. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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The key research issues for organizational/corporate cultures are arguably three-fold: What is organizational culture (*Definition*)? Do organizational cultures matter for business and management efficiency (*Impacts*)? How are we to go about leveraging organizational cultures in regard to goals, performance and achievements (*Business*)?

This article focuses on the first issue. Clear definitions are symptomatic of a mature research fields as they pave the way for further research. Unfortunately, how to define cultures appears to be the “weakest link” for many cultural studies, and organizational cultures are no exception, despite three decades into the field beginning with Pettigrew (1979). To be sure, there has been no shortage of trials, and as early as 1952 researchers had identified more than 160 definitions according to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1991)—so many that some (e.g., Detert, 2000; Martin, 2002; Denison, 1996) have been talking about “paradigm wars”, “war games” or “cultural wars”. Others (Schultz and Hatch, 1996) felt the need to accommodate multiple paradigms. Behind these definitions, however, is a field dominated by a few closely related disciplines whose definitions [1] have only subtle distinctions, [2] tend to define one abstract concept (e.g., “shared values”) in terms of similarly abstract concepts (e.g., “norms,” “assumptions,” and “beliefs”), and [3] share common difficulties in empirical measurements and analysis (e.g., Hofstede et al., 1990).

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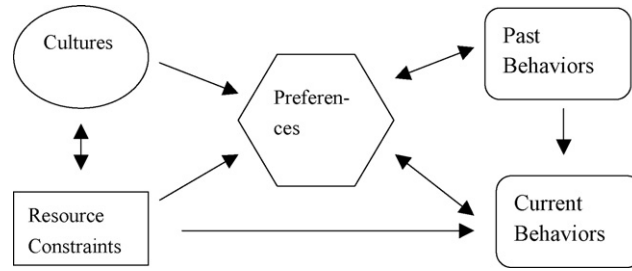


Fig. 1. The General Behavior Model.

One may choose, with reasons, to call these *features* rather than *problems*. Are we not trying to fix what has not been broken? This possibility is substantiated by noting four symptoms—*overly emphasizing long-run equilibrium at the cost of short-run dynamics; stressing communalities (or equilibrium) while overlooking diversities; underscoring emic analyses and losing sights on etic ones*; and *dissecting the intangible from the tangible*. Given the problems, what the field needs now is not just one more definition along the same disciplinary lines, but a dramatic rethink, a refresher, or mould-breaker. Responding to this need, we propose a General Behavioral Model (GBM) and use it to generate two new definitions of organizational cultures.

In the rest of the article, Section 1 introduces the GBM; Section 2 offers two new definitions of organizational cultures; and Section 3 discusses the conceptual and management implications.

### 1. A General Behavioral Model

#### 1.1. Introducing GBM

We now present an axiomatic model that may be called the “General Behavioral Model”. In its symbolic form we have:

$$y_{t,i} = f \left\{ \sum_{k=1}^{K_1} y_{t-k,i} \mid \sum_{k=0}^{K_2} p_{t-k,i} \mid f \left( \sum_{k=0}^{K_3} \sum_{j \neq i}^J x_{t-k,j} \right), \sum_{k=0}^{K_4} \tau_{t-k} \right\} \tag{1}$$

The left hand side denotes a particular behavior of the *i*th individual at time *t*. In an organization, this could be a top executive’s untruthful quarterly finance report to Wall Street, or, in a more positive spirit, an employee’s decision to stay extra hours until clients’ problems get fixed. Terms on the right hand side are divided into three sets by two vertical lines, where terms *before* the vertical line are *conditional* upon the terms *after*. Thus, the first term denotes the same *i*th individual’s similar, related, or identical behavior at previous times (from one up to  $K_1$  steps back in one’s lifetime). Using the same examples, this could be the executives’ untruthful move in the previous quarters. The next *p* stands for (personal) preferences of the same *i*th individual at present time *t* as well as at previous times (up to  $K_2$ , which may or may not equal  $K_1$ ), as revealed or stated from past behaviors under similar tradeoff situations. The third term is a complex function (note the extra ‘*f*’ in front of the nested parenthesis) of two terms. One sigma ( $\sum$ ) collects impacts along time from the instantaneous *t* to a potentially long way (up to  $K_3$  steps,  $\forall K_3 > K_1$ ;  $\forall K_3 > K_1$ , considering that aggregates last longer than individuals) back, and another stands for the “critical masses of people” or a function of social aggregates excluding the *i*th individual. The last term,  $\tau$ , separated by a comma, represents resource constraints, including natural, technical, and situational constraints facing the *i*th individual at time *t* and possibly before that (up to  $K_4$ ,  $\forall K_4 \leq K_1$ , considering that the constraints for any particular behavior last shorter than one’s lifetime, steps back).

In words, the GBM says one’s current behavior is contingent on his/her past behaviors, his/her revealed and stated preferences, the aggregates’ influences and external factors or resource constraints either shared or unique to each behavior/person. Fig. 1 below shows the GBM graphically.

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