Cultural Approach to Organizations:

A Critique of Clifford Geertz and Michael Pacanowsky’s Theory

In Em Griffin’s *A First Look at Communication Theory*

Jimena Galvan

Chapman University
I. INTRODUCTION

Clifford Geertz is known for his work on cultural insights (Griffin, 2012). He has written that culture is like a web; in order for culture to exist, there must be shared “meaning, understanding, and sense making” (Griffin, 2012, p. 261). To him, culture means utilizing the same language, eating the same food, and partaking in the same traditions. Geertz compared culture to a web because he felt that to travel from one side of the web to the other one first needs to learn what holds the web together (Griffin, 2012). The strands are made up by the common interpretations in the community.

Michael Pacanowsky then applied Geertz’ cultural insights to organizational life (Griffin, 2012). He believed that organizations spun their own webs. The process of “spinning” the web, in this case, is communication (Griffin, 2012). Organization workers communicate with each other and create a shared meaning.

The research method preferred is ethnography; this allows researchers to learn who people are, what traditions they have, and why they celebrate them. Ethnography is the best method to use because it allows the researcher to get every side of the story. For example, a researcher could look at corporate stories to learn about the values the company holds, personal stories to discover how company individuals see themselves, and collegial stories to see what employees think of each other. The next sections of this paper will look at relevant scholarly sources, critique Griffin’s book chapter, and fit the theory into a paradigm.

II. SYNTHESIS

The first scholarly source to be looked at to examine Cultural Approach to Organizations is Ponterotto’s (2006) article entitled, “Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept ‘Thick Description.’” This article took the term “thick
description” and aimed to fully define the term, include examples to aid in clarification, and provide guidelines for presenting thick descriptions in written reports.

The article defines thick description by contrasting it with thin description and emphasizing that thick description involves more than gathering details. Thick description includes “context and meaning” and interpreting the intentions behind people’s behaviors and actions (Ponterotto, 2006).

This article offered up the possibility of thick descriptions being confusing to understand. Ponterotto (2006) explained that the definition of thick description may be confusing to most because there is no one singular definition of the word. The best definition of the word includes requirements for what makes a description a thick description. A thick description must: 1) give the context of an act, 2) state intentions and meanings behind an act, 3) follow the act through its development and evolution, and 4) write out the act, which can then be interpreted (Holloway, 1997; Schwandt, 2001; and Denzin, 1989 in Ponterotto, 2006).

Further research will uncover that there are actually eleven different variations or types of thick description: micro, macro historical, biographical, situational, relational, interactional, intrusive, incomplete, glossed, purely descriptive, and descriptive interpretive (Denzin, 1989 in Ponterotto, 2006). With so many types of thick descriptions and so many different definitions, it is easy to get confused.

An example offered in the article of a thick description is Melba Vasquez’s childhood anecdote included in Handbook of Multicultural Counseling. This anecdote falls under five of the variations of thick description; it is biographical, situational, historical, relational, and interactional (Ponterotto, 2006).
In terms of presenting thick descriptions in reports, the findings would be included under *Participants, Procedures, Results, and Discussion*. For *Participants*, the researcher is responsible for fully describing the participants included in the study, including demographic and psychological characteristics. However, cautious steps must be taken in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. For *Procedures*, the researcher is responsible for fully describing characteristics of the research such as the locations involved, the length of interviews, and any recording procedures. For *Results*, the researcher is responsible for including “long quotes” and “long excerpts” from interviews and interactions (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 547). Finally, in the *Discussion* section, the researchers merge the long quotes with their own interpretations of the behaviors and events.

The second scholarly source to be looked at in order to examine the Cultural Approach to Organizations was Trice and Beyer’s (1984) article entitled, “Studying organizational cultures through rites and ceremonials”. This article talked about rites and ceremonies and added several different other cultural forms. The article defined, rites and ceremonies but also rituals, myths, sagas, legends, stories, folktales, symbols, language, gestures, physical settings, and artifacts.

A majority of the paper was spent differentiating between different types of rites and producing examples for them. These types of rites include: rites of passage, rites of degradation, rites of enhancement, rites of renewal, rites of conflict reduction, and rites of integration (Trice and Beyer, 1984).

Rites of passage are used to facilitate transitions of persons into social roles and statuses that are new for them (Trice & Beyer, 1984). Examples of a rite a passage can be inductions into clubs or the military. Rites of integration can include office Christmas parties or company softball games. These types of rites “encourage and revive common feelings that bind members
together and commit them to a social system” (Trice and Beyer, 1984, p. 657). In other words, these rites introduce people into a culture and reinforce a culture.

Every rite has consequences, some good and some bad (Trice and Beyer, 1984). For example, rites of passage help to reestablish equilibrium in relations. Rites of integration can offer a temporary place to loosen or ignore social norms. However, a consequence that can be negative depending on the situation is the consequence of rites of renewal. This type of rite can result in the reinforcement of existing systems of power. If the existing system of power is unfair or corrupt, a rite of renewal will not change anything. This article gave a thorough explanation of rites and ceremonies and explains different examples of the rites.

The third scholarly article looked at in order to examine the Cultural Approach to Organizations was Morgan’s (1986) chapter entitled, “Creating Social Reality: Organizations as Cultures.” This article was a summary of the theory, which reinforced many of the topics covered in the chapter.

A focus of this article was on cultures and subcultures in the workplace. This reinforced the idea that culture (including workplace culture) is developed through interactions. In the workplace, interactions such as meetings, Christmas parties, and trips to the water coolers can create a culture. The culture is further created and reinforced through rituals and ceremonies. A main point in the article is that formal leaders cannot create a culture. While they can create a mission statement, values, or rules, they cannot create a shared meaning. They cannot force the workers to feel loyal to the organization nor can they force the workers to feel united to each other and to the organization.

Corporations can also have subcultures. These are cultures that exist within the whole culture. An example of a subculture can be different departments within a corporation. The
article mentioned that if there is a discrepancy between subcultures or if a subculture does not feel loyal to the corporation, a counter culture could develop. Counter cultures do not feel loyal to their company nor do they believe in the same mission. An example of a counterculture could be a mole in the department who feels the need to sabotage events or programs put on by the organization. This article mentioned several main points that are included in the theory. It further reinforced several topics discussed in the chapter.

III. CRITIQUE OF GRIFFIN’S ANALYSIS

This chapter was a good starting point for someone who wants a clear overview of the theory. It made it easy to understand and included several, relevant examples to simplify the parts even more. However, in light of the second look sources, the chapter did not go into enough depth.

One thing the chapter failed to mention was the complexity of “thick descriptions”. In the chapter, it discussed thick descriptions and gave one example for what would go into a thick description. In the second look sources; it mentioned that there are several different types of thick descriptions. This would have added confusion to the chapter, but it would have been a thorough overview. Furthermore, if it were explained fully enough, or simply enough, it would not have created confusion. A simple way to do this would have been to simply state the different forms of thick description and defined it as simple as possible.

The article was fully dedicated to the topic of thick descriptions but it offered a few examples. These examples, or a similar one, could have been used to clarify at least one of the numerous types. In the article, one of the examples was an example of five different types of thick descriptions.
If the chapter did not want to go into depth about the different types of thick descriptions, they should have at least mentioned the detail it goes into and reference the second look source at the back of the book. Most of the types of thick description are easy to define and are words students or any reader would easily understand.

Another thing the chapter failed to do was discuss rites and every different forms of rites. In the chapter, the author simply mentioned rites and ceremonies. It barely defined it and gave one example of what makes a rite, a rite, and why it is important in the creation and maintenance of a culture. The article gave different examples of rites and went into more detail to describe each one.

Furthermore, the article mentioned that there are consequences of each form. Some consequences are positive; some consequences are negative. The book chapter did not go into detail about the consequences of a company having rites. It did, just as an aside, mention that it creates culture, or creates camaraderie between the workers. While this is one example of a consequence, it is not the only one. Some examples of consequences that the article mentioned was reinforcing power and rules, changing people in power, integrating people into a culture, or reinstating a power equilibrium.

Again, a simple mention of the depth that the term “rite” can go into would have sufficed in order to be a thorough overview. The author did not have to go into ceremonies or language or gestures, he could have kept it at just rites. While the mention of just the name of the specific rite could have led to confusion in the reader, the mention of the name and an example of the specific rite would have been enough clarification. For example, the author could have written that a specific type of rite is a “rite of integration” and that an example of that is an office Christmas party. The author could also have discussed rites of passage (which is a well known
rite) but broadened the examples to include integration into the Army. These are some of the things the chapter lacked or could have done better in order to give a more thorough overview of specific terms in theory. However, the author of the book did do a thorough job in explaining cultures, subcultures, and how a culture is created.

Article number three was all about culture, subculture, and how a culture is created (in terms of an organization). This article further reinstated everything the chapter included with no discrepancies between them. The only difference between the article and the chapter was the inclusion of example. The article gave plenty of examples for the different terms given.

The article did give the example of a mole when talking about a counter-culture, which made this section superior to the chapter. This term, counter-culture, was one that was difficult to find an example for. The chapter did, however, fully define the term. It was defined in a clear manner, but did not give an example. This was a flaw because the lack of example made it difficult to apply to the real world.

The book and article also mentioned subcultures. In this case, the book came out superior to the article. The book condensed the material and still gave an example. It was far easier to understand how a subculture could exist within an organization or corporation when the idea of departments was introduced. Using the different departments made the reader think of high school cliques (everyone grouped together based on interests), which made it easier to understand how a separate culture could exist within an umbrella culture.

The book and article also mentioned culture similarly. They both coincided almost word for word on this topic. They both mentioned how a culture is created in the workplace and how a formal leader relates to the culture in the workplace. Both the article and the book chapter mentioned that a formal leader cannot influence the culture in any way. They cannot force the
Camaraderie between the workers nor can they force the workers to be loyal to each other and to the company.

Overall, the chapter gave a very thorough overview—for someone looking for the basics. This chapter should be used as a supplement and additional readings should be assigned along this chapter in order to get a thorough, in depth summary of the theory. However, if simple understanding is all that is needed, this chapter would work perfectly to gain understanding.

IV. COMMUNICATION THEORY PARADIGM STANDARDS

This theory has sections that could fit into the objective paradigm, the critical paradigm, and the interpretive paradigm. The following section will lay out the requirements a theory needs to fulfill in order to be considered a critical, interpretive, or objective paradigm. Then, it will be stated whether the theory meets that requirement. At the end, a final conclusion will be made as to what paradigm the theory should be included in.

A. OBJECTIVE PARADIGM

In order for a theory to fall under the Objective Paradigm, there are six requirements that must be met. This sub-section of the paper will look further into the requirements and apply them to the Cultural Approach to Organizations.

The first requirement a theory needs to meet in order to be included in the Objective Paradigm is that it must have a thorough explanation of the data. This requirement means that the theory should focus the attention on the variables and keep the attention away from irrelevant data. Also, the theory should explain what happens and why it happens, explaining both the process of the research and the results.

The Cultural Approach to Organizations fits this requirement because it aims to document what happens in a culture and then interprets it to find out why it happens.
Furthermore, in research papers will thoroughly document the process used and the results. As stated before, if (for example) interviews were the method of research, the Procedures section of a paper must thoroughly document how the interviews took place, where the interviews took place, and how long the interviews were. Even more, the Results section of the paper has to include long quotes gathered from the interviews and long excerpts written about the interactions. This is a thorough explanation of the process and results—fulfilling the first requirement.

In order to be an objective theory, the theory must predict future events. A good theory in this paradigm will predict what communication will cause. This requirement is better suited in the natural sciences because effects are easier to predict in the natural sciences than with the social sciences. The Cultural Approach to Organizations does not fit this requirement because this theory only aims to describe what is going on, not predict what will happen.

The third requirement is that the theory should be relatively simple. The Cultural Approach to Organizations can fit into this requirement because the simple overview is just that—simple. However, the theory goes beyond the simple overview in the book—making it complex and therefore not fit into this requirement. The definition used in the book would fit this requirement. The definition and all the terms gathered from the second sources reveal it to be very complex, however. This is the second requirement that the theory does not fit.

The fourth requirement in order for a theory to be Objective is that the hypotheses must be testable. In order for the theory to fall under this paradigm, the research hypothesis must be testable. This is the requirement that the Cultural Approach to Organization will never be able to fall under. The research method used in this theory is ethnography. In ethnography, the researcher goes to a culture and emerges him or herself into the culture. This will never be
replicable because every person will have a different experience, even if it is in the same place. The same people might be present but they might act differently with different people. Furthermore, ethnography includes thick descriptions. Thick descriptions include interpretations. Every person will have a different interpretation of why an event is important or why a culture celebrates a certain tradition.

The fifth requirement is that a theory in this paradigm should be practical. That is, a theory should provide control. The theory should be useful in the real world. One of the major critiques of this theory is that it is useless. It describes the real world and describes it fully, but does not do anything with the information. A researcher using this theory does not aim to change any inequalities discovered nor does it use the information presented in order to predict the future. An objectivist would rule this theory as useless, therefore ruling this requirement as unmet.

The last requirement that must be met is that the research method of choice is quantitative. The research must rely on numerical values rather than linguistic terms. Also, there needs to be an experiment and the papers must report on both the experimental groups and the control groups, focusing on the differences between them. The control group is the group that has nothing done to it; no variables are manipulated. This group is seen in their natural setting. The experimental group is the group that will be manipulated in some way in order to find cause and effect. The Results sections should discuss how experimental group was changed or how a variable was manipulated to find the causes and effects. In an experiment, a prediction is made about what will happen, then a variable will be manipulated, and finally the differences between the control group and the experimental group are noted. Other examples of quantitative research are surveys. Surveys are methods that use questionnaires or very structured interviews
to collect self reported data. The Cultural Approach to Organizations does not fulfill this requirement for many reasons.

First, the preferred method of research for this theory is qualitative rather than quantitative. The research done within this theory relies on linguistic terms. Numbers are not used because researchers from this theory are dealing with people and people can very rarely be simplified down to numbers. The terms used instead are words and interactions.

Second, there are no experiments done with this theory. As a result, there will be no control groups and no experimental groups. The Results section of the research papers coming from this theory will include long quotes and long excerpts from field notes instead of long, numerical interpretations of experiments.

Finally, a survey would never be used with this theory. The closest method in this section to ethnography is a structured interview, but even those remove the human aspect. Structured interviews are very structured in that they do not include open-ended questions nor do they leave room for the respondent to explain himself or herself. These types of interviews do not adequately reflect what participants think, feel, or intend to do. A better method of finding these things out, according to a Cultural Approach to Organizations researcher is ethnography.

In conclusion, the Cultural Approach to Organizations is not an objective theory. The theory only fits into one requirement. This paradigm is better suited for a theory where the information can be simplified down to numbers. This theory focuses too much on ethnographic work and in depth interviews to be scientific in the positivist sense.

B. CRITICAL PARADIGM

In order for a theory to fall under the Critical Paradigm, there are four requirements that must be met. The basis of this paradigm deals with power, imbalances, and inequalities. This
sub-section will look deeper into the four requirements and apply them to the Cultural Approach to Organizations.

The first requirement is that a theory must systematically unmask the ideologies of the communication practices. The theory could fulfill this requirement because it aims to unmask (clarify) and understand everything. The purpose of living with a culture for months at a time is to uncover everything about them. Ethnographic work reveals traditions and beliefs about a culture. This theory could easily uncover the ideologies, beliefs, and principles of a culture as well as uncover why they are important to a culture and how they became important in the first place. This requirement is fulfilled by the theory.

Requirement number two is the systematic uncovering of power imbalances or injustices in the culture. This requirement can be fulfilled after requirement number one is fulfilled. A critical theory will uncover the ideologies of a culture and look for power imbalances. If a power imbalance is uncovered, the critical theorist will take note of it and report it. The Cultural Approach to Organizations might fit this requirement. The responsibility of the researcher is to document everything—and this could include power imbalances and injustices. However, the research of an ethnographer will never go beyond documenting and reporting.

The third requirement of this theory is a community of agreement. In order for a theory to be a critical theory, both academic activists and social activists should use it. Activists of any kind will, in most likelihood, not use this theory. The only reason an activist would use this theory would be if they were also using another—power-related theory alongside it. This theory does not call for change or anything else activists stand for. For this reason, the Cultural Approach to Organizations does not fit this requirement. This theory only focuses on documenting/describing/interpreting.
The fourth, and most important requirement for a theory to be critical is a call to reform society. The Critical paradigm believes changing unjust power regimes and correcting power imbalances is the most important thing a theory could do. This statement requires a theory to generate alternatives for a different future, create effective strategies for policy change, and call on social action. This paradigm requires a theory to take the information learned and uncovered, and create change with it. Again, the Cultural Approach to Organizations only focuses on documenting and reporting information and interactions. This theory takes all the information uncovered, interprets it, and reports it. There is no change involved. Instead, change is frowned upon. Just like a formal leader cannot create a culture, a formal leader cannot change the culture. Any power imbalances uncovered will be reported as such and left alone. The biggest critique of this theory is that it is “useless” because it does not do anything nor does it require readers to do anything. It simply reports the findings. Last but not least, the theory defines culture as shared meaning while the critical paradigm defines culture as primarily political-economic.

In conclusion, this theory is not a Critical Theory. Although it fulfills one of the initial requirements, it does not fulfill the most important requirements. This theory does not aim to change anything political-economic or inspire political-legal action in the readers.

C. INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

In order for a theory to be included in the Interpretive Paradigm, five requirements must be met. This sub-section of the paper will look deeper at the five requirements and apply them to the Cultural Approach to Organizations.

The first requirement is that a theory must present a new understanding of people. This theory must clarify texts and meanings in a culture, uncover shared patterns of communication, and overall must value the native perspective. This theory perfectly satisfies this requirement.
The theory aims to uncover meaning in cultures and clarify them for the readers. Furthermore, there were whole sections in the readings that mentioned, “Shared patterns of communication”. Both the articles and chapter discussed how a pattern of communication is created and shared in an organization. Additionally, ethnographic work prides itself on valuing native perspectives. An ethnographic researcher will live with a culture in order to accurately understand the culture and report using the “voice” of the culture. This requirement has been fulfilled.

The second requirement is that it should clarify values. That is, this theory should describe and interpret cultural distinctiveness and elaborate the worldviews, beliefs, and lifestyles of a culture. Again, this theory perfectly satisfies this requirement. Ethnographic work’s main goal is to describe every interaction and then interpret it. Within the writings, the worldviews, beliefs, and lifestyles of a culture are defined, described, and interpreted. So far, the Cultural Approach to Organizations has satisfied both requirements.

The third requirement is aesthetic appeal. The theory should look appealing. A theory in this paradigm can spark appreciation from a reader. The theory satisfies this requirement because it is clear and is captivating.

The fourth requirement is a community of agreement. A theory should receive broad support within a community of scholars who are both interested and knowledgeable about the area. The Cultural Approach to Organizations satisfies this requirement because scholars all agree with the theory. Different scholars have adapted their own definitions for certain terms, but they can all agree on the theory itself.

The fifth and final requirement is that a theory should include qualitative research. Qualitative research consists of studying things in their natural settings and attempting to make sense of phenomena. A method of qualitative research is textual analysis, which describes and
interprets the characteristics of any text. Lastly, another method is ethnography, where “participant observation” is used to better experience and understand meanings and functions in a culture. This theory again perfectly satisfies this requirement as well. All throughout the paper, the word “ethnography” has appeared as a way to define this theory. A researcher using the Cultural Approach to Organizations will go to the organization to study in (study it in its natural setting). He or she will then take notes and use thick description to interpret the information. This method is the best way for a researcher to experience and understand meanings and functions in a culture (i.e. organizations or corporations).

In conclusion, this theory is clearly an interpretive theory. Every single requirement was passed with flying colors. Throughout the book chapter and the supplemental second look sources, words like ‘ethnography’ and ‘interpretations’ were mentioned to describe and define the theory. One of the main characteristics of this theory was its work with ethnographic fieldwork. One of the clearly laid out requirements of this paradigm is the use of ethnographic research.

This theory might have met some requirements for being an Objective and Critical theory, but ultimately it is an Interpretive Theory.

V. CONCLUSION

This theory is the perfect theory to use if a company wants to find out why another company is so successful. The researcher immerses themselves into the corporation and learns as much as they can about the culture of the business. Hidden meanings in traditions and rites could be the key to company success—something that could not be uncovered by simply reading the company’s mission statement.
This Interpretive theory accurately documents the findings using the voice of the participants. Through ethnographic work and thick descriptions, researchers are able to interpret the actions and traditions deemed important to a specific organization leading to a thorough understanding of the culture; something surveys and questionnaires would fail to uncover.

Although it does not encourage change, it is still an important and useful theory. This theory is important because it offers an inside view into a culture using that culture’s language. In a company, the researcher will learn as much about the theory and uncover why certain rites and traditions are important. This can be useful to a formal leader because they can discover what it is they are doing right in their company and continue doing it.

For a brief overview of this theory, chapter 20 of the book, “A First Look at Communication” by Em Griffin is the perfect place to start. It mentions everything the theory contains as well as offers examples. The chapter does not make the theory complicated nor does it oversimplify it. Although it does fail to go into depth regarding rites and ceremonies and thick descriptions, it did adequately describe and discuss culture, subculture, and counterculture; making it the perfect introductory reading to gain understanding about the Cultural Approach to Organizations theory. Further supplemental readings are also included which can help one go deeper into the theory.
References


