



## On Studying Organizational Cultures

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## On Studying Organizational Cultures

Andrew M. Pettigrew

This paper is representative of my long-term research interests in the longitudinal-processual study of organizations, a perspective I feel is neglected. The longitudinal-processual approach to the study of organizations recognizes that an organization or any other social system may profitably be explored as a continuing system with a past, a present, and a future. Sound theory must, therefore, take into account the history and the future of a system and relate them to the present. What are advocated here are not mere methodological niceties. They have a fundamental impact on the kinds of research problems that become open for investigation, the possibilities of making certain kinds of conceptual developments, and the choice of language systems with which these concepts are expressed. A longitudinal-processual analysis is more likely to be interested in language systems of *becoming* than of *being*, of processes of structural elaboration rather than the precise description of structural form, of mechanisms that create, maintain, and dissolve systems of power (Pettigrew, 1973) rather than just attempt to codify distributions of power at one point in time.

### BACKGROUND

This paper offers a brief and necessarily speculative look at some of the concepts and processes associated with the creation of organizational cultures and, therefore, with the birth of organizations. Although no strong reference will be made to the data here, the frame of reference chosen for the paper has been influenced by the empirical study of a private British boarding school. The school was founded by an individual with a strong and quite idiosyncratic personality who had a definite vision of what kind of organizational structures, mechanisms, people, and processes could realize his vision.

The data collection began in 1972 with a before, during, and after analysis of the impact of a major structural change on certain aspects of the structure, functioning, and climate of relationships in the school. The change began in September 1972. Two sets of interviews and questionnaires were administered to staff and pupils during the spring of 1973 and 1974.

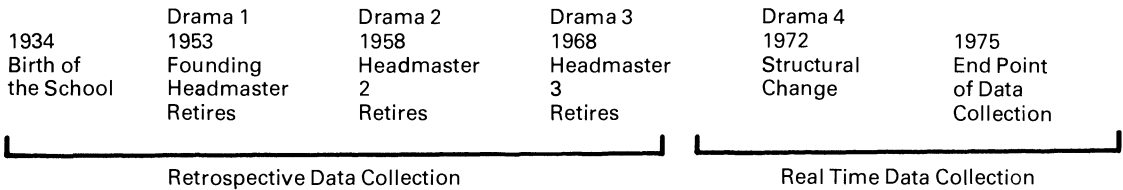
The cross-sectional and processual analyses have been complemented with a historical analysis of the birth and evolution of the school from 1934 to 1972. This retrospective analysis is based on long interviews with former masters, governors, and pupils who were at the school from the 1930s, until 1972. These interview data have been supplemented with documentary sources, including private papers, speeches, administrative documents, and other archival material. A number of unobtrusive measures have been and are being developed from these data.

### Social Dramas as a Research Focus

The overall design of the research is anchored around the study of a set of social dramas (Turner, 1957) and the relative routine that intersperses them. The point of studying a sequence of social dramas longitudinally is that they provide a transparent look at the growth, evolution, transformation, and, conceivably, decay of an organization over time. The

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dramas in the school were the points of leadership succession as the school changed from headmaster to headmaster and as it made a major structural change in 1972 that altered its population. Each of these dramas was sufficiently engaging of the minds and actions of the people in the school to be regarded as critical events. It should be clear, therefore, that it is not just the researcher's judgment which pinpoints the social dramas. The sequence of dramas, which gives a form to the order of the research design, is shown in the Figure.



**Figure. Longitudinal research design.**

In terms of a general analysis of social process and the particular concern with unravelling the dynamics of the evolution of an organization, this kind of design has a number of potential advantages:

1. Each drama provides a clear point of data collection, an important practical consideration in such an extended stream of time, events, people, and processes.
2. Each drama can act as an in-depth case study within the overall case study and thereby provide a dramatic glimpse into the current workings of the social system.
3. The longitudinal study of a sequence of dramas allows varying readings to be taken of the development of the organization, of the impact of one drama on successive and even consequent dramas, and of the kinds of mechanisms that lead to, accentuate, and regulate the impact of each drama.
4. As the point about mechanisms of transformation implies, only dramas can provide consequence and meaning in relation to routines. The quality and analytical impact of the study of the dramas can only be as good as the researcher's understanding of the relative routines with which each drama is interspersed. In this sense the routines provide the contextual backdrop for the foreground drama and the researcher becomes interested in the interactive effect between context and foreground and the mechanisms and processes of transformation from routine to drama to new routine and further drama.
5. Examining the dramas affords the opportunity to study continuous processes.<sup>1</sup> In the school study the focus on continuous process relates to questions of organizational goals, their emergence and transformation, and to changes in systems of beliefs, power relationships, and culture.

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Using a similar research design I (1973) studied four capital investment decisions in a single firm over a twelve-year period. In that case, the real time data collection was two years and the retrospective-historical analysis ten years. The dramas were major capital investment decisions and the continuous processes, the study of the ebb and flow of power relationships, and the emergence, transformation, and decline of two occupational groups.

## DESCRIBING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES: KEY CONCEPTS

One of the benefits of a research design built around the analysis of a sequence of social dramas is the possibility it

affords to study the emergence and development of organizational cultures. Using the example of the school study, I will discuss how purpose, commitment, and order are generated in an organization both through the feelings and actions of its founder and through the amalgam of beliefs, ideology, language, ritual, and myth we collapse into the label of organizational culture.

I have another objective: to encourage the use of some concepts which have developed in sociology and anthropology. These concepts are directly relevant to the concern in the field of organizational behavior as to how purpose, commitment, and order are created in the early life of an organization. In the context of the action frame of reference for the study of organizations (Silverman, 1970), those concepts reveal man as a creator of symbols, languages, beliefs, visions, ideologies, and myths, in effect, man as a *creator* and *manager of meaning*.

Yet before I discuss the importance of the symbolic in the study of organizations, I shall briefly discuss some aspects of the literature on entrepreneurs, followed by sections on symbolism and its role in the creation of purpose, and on identity and meaning in a newly established organization, and a discussion of how the problem of commitment was handled by an entrepreneur in the school.

### **Entrepreneurs**

To define entrepreneurs is difficult for it is one of those terms used so regularly by the general public as well as in more specific and yet differing ways by social scientists that one wonders if it has any discriminatory power left at all. The tendency to attribute highly symbolic value to the word entrepreneur is starkly visible in one of the most often quoted research studies in the field by Collins and Moore (1970). In the introduction to their book (p. 2), they justify their research on entrepreneurs and the process of founding an organization partly to provide systematic knowledge to allow "the free world to stay free." Elsewhere entrepreneurs are portrayed as heroes. Boswell (1972: 70), while asking the researcher to be wary of the romanticization often associated with founding entrepreneurs, presents a fairly heroic picture of entrepreneurship: "His course is determined by fiats of various key outsiders on the one hand and his own supply of persistence, guts, and ability on the other."

This concern with the courage, persistence, and ability of entrepreneurs is reflected in a more refined way in the established research literature that constructs psychological profiles of the entrepreneur. McClelland (1961) and his associates have built up an impressive, though controversial set of instruments and data around the theme of achievement motivation. The aim is to tease out the psychological characteristics that differentiate entrepreneurs from non-entrepreneurs and therefore to work toward specifying some of the prerequisites for the emergence of entrepreneurship. The kinds of conclusions drawn from this research are that entrepreneurs in high-performing firms tend to have high needs for achievement and moderate needs for power while entrepreneurs in low-performing firms tend to have low

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needs for achievement and either high or low needs for power (Roberts, 1968; Wainer and Rubin, 1969). This work and the less ambitious research by Schrage (1965) on veridical perception, by Hornaday and Bunker (1970) examining the deprivation of entrepreneurs in their early years, and by Stanworth and Curran (1973) on entrepreneurs as socially marginal people, have made a useful contribution toward probing into the psychology of entrepreneurs. What each of these studies lacks, however, is any real attempt to examine the relationships between the entrepreneur and his organization. Apart from some vague references to leadership style, this research literature does not deal with the interdependencies and reciprocities between the entrepreneur and his staff or how some of the crucial problems of organizational functioning such as those associated with purpose, commitment, and order are handled by the entrepreneur.

If we move away from considering (in isolation) the personal characteristics of entrepreneurs toward an analysis of the *person* in his context, the problem of entrepreneurship may be stated in a specifically interactive fashion. I assume here that the essential problem of entrepreneurship is the translation of individual drive into collective purpose and commitment. With this viewpoint the focus is not what makes the entrepreneur but rather what does the entrepreneur make.

Although it is conventional to equate entrepreneurship with the taking of financial risks in the context of business enterprises, this seems an unnecessarily limited institutional context within which to use the term entrepreneur. Many of those who create new institutions outside the business sector and who are often referred to by the terms founders and innovators, have to deal with many of the same organizational, managerial, and personal challenges as those faced by business entrepreneurs. For the purposes of this paper the term entrepreneur will be used to denote any person who takes primary responsibility for mobilizing people and other resources to initiate, give purpose to, build, and manage a new organization.

## **Symbolism and the Creation of Organizational Cultures**

There have been a number of different approaches in the research literature around the theme of the birth, growth, and evolution of organizations. One approach represented by Pugh and his associate, Donaldson (1972), has examined the dimensions of bureaucracy and how they change with organizational size. Another approach found in the works of Boswell (1972), Greiner (1972), and Strauss (1974) looks rather more specifically at the interaction between organizational structuring and functioning and uses characterizations either of phases or crises of development to discuss the evolution of organizations. A third focus in the literature, and the one closest to our present concern, approaches organizational birth and evolution through processes of character formation (Selznick, 1957) and the creation of organizational sagas (Clark, 1972).

Selznick's and Clark's definitions of their terms character and saga are fairly similar. Selznick talks of the embodiment of values in an organizational structure through statements

of mission, program of activity, selective recruitment, and socialization, while Clark defines saga as a system of collective understanding of unique accomplishment in a formally established group. Both authors discuss the necessary conditions for the creation of sagas and highlight the importance of an initially strong purpose, conceived and enunciated by a single man or a small group. Clark also emphasizes the importance for saga creation of the setting of an autonomous new organization where there is no established structure or rigid customs and where the leader can build from the top down.

Entrepreneurs may be seen not only as creators of some of the more rational and tangible aspects of organizations such as structures and technologies but also as creators of symbols, ideologies, languages, beliefs, rituals, and myths, aspects of the more cultural and expressive components of organizational life. New organizations thus represent settings where it is possible to study transition processes from no beliefs to new beliefs, from no rules to new rules, from no culture to new culture, and in general terms to observe the translation of ideas into structural and expressive forms.

### The Concept of Organizational Culture

In the pursuit of our everyday tasks and objectives, it is all too easy to forget the less rational and instrumental, the more expressive social tissue around us that gives those tasks meaning. Yet in order for people to function within any given setting, they must have a continuing sense of what that reality is all about in order to be acted upon. Culture is the system of such publicly and collectively accepted meanings operating for a given group at a given time. This system of terms, forms, categories, and images interprets a people's own situation to themselves. Indeed what is supposed to be distinctive about man compared with other animals is his capacity to invent and communicate determinants of his own behavior (White, 1949; Cassirer, 1953).

While providing a general sense of orientation, culture treated as a unitary concept in this way lacks analytical bite. A potentially more fruitful approach is to regard culture as the source of a family of concepts. The offsprings of the concept of culture I have in mind are symbol, language, ideology, belief, ritual, and myth. Of these symbol is the most-inclusive category not only because language, ritual, and myth are forms of symbolism but because symbolic analysis is a frame of reference, a style of analysis in its own right (Duncan, 1968; Abner Cohen, 1974; Willis, 1975).

The definition of symbol used here is derived from anthropology: "Symbols are objects, acts, relationships, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel men to action" (Abner Cohen, 1974: 23). Symbol construction serves as a vehicle for group and organizational conception. As a group<sup>2</sup> or organization at birth represents its situation to itself and to the outside world it emphasizes, distorts, and ignores and thereby attaches names and values to its structure, activities, purposes, and even the physical fabric around it. The symbols that arise out of these processes — the organization's vocabulary, the design of the organization's buildings,

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See Pettigrew (1975) for examples of symbol construction among groups of specialists in organizations.

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the beliefs about the use and distribution of power and privilege, the rituals and myths which legitimate those distributions — have significant functional consequences for the organization.

Another aspect of organizational culture is the system of vocal signs we call language. With its immense variety and complexity, language can typify and stabilize experience and integrate those experiences into a meaningful whole (Berger and Luckman, 1966). These processes of typification are essential features of the process of creating culture in a new organization. But language is not just outside us and given to us as part of our cultural and historical heritage, it is also within us, we create it, and it impels us. Language is also a vehicle for achieving practical effects. Words are part of action. Socially built and maintained, language embodies implicit exhortations and social evaluations. By acquiring the categories of a language, we acquire the structured “ways” of a group, and along with the language, the value implications of those ways. “A vocabulary is not merely a string of words; immanent within it are societal textures — institutional and political coordinates. Back of a vocabulary lie sets of collective action” (Mills, 1972: 62). The study of organizational vocabularies is long overdue. The analysis of their origins and uses and in particular their role in expressing communal values, evoking past experiences, providing seed beds for human action, and legitimating current and evolving distributions of power represent key areas of inquiry in research on the creation and evolution of new organizations.

As mentioned, one of the key attributes of symbols in general and language systems in particular, is their potential for impelling men to action. Ideologies and their component systems of belief are also widely accepted to have such action-impelling qualities. According to Wilson (1973: 91), “An ideology is a set of beliefs about the social world and how it operates, containing statements about the rightness of certain social arrangements and what action would be undertaken in the light of those statements.” Ideologies can play a significant role in the processes of organizational creation because they have the potential to link attitude and action. Smelser (1963) describes this as a process of social short circuiting. The link is made between broad, often moral diagnoses of situations and to action at a specific level. The ideology mobilizes consciousness and action by connecting social burdens with general ethical principles. The result is that commitment is provided to perform everyday organizational tasks on the way to some grand scheme of things. But the potency of organizational ideologies will depend not only on the social context in which they function and how they are created and by whom, but also how they are maintained and kept alive. It is here that the final two concepts relevant to this analysis of creating culture play their part.

The concepts of ritual and myth tend to have implicit definitions in everyday use which trivialize their potential value as analytical tools. Ritual, for example, is sometimes understood to be merely repetitive sequences of activity devoid of meaning to the actors in the ritual and myth is often thought of as false belief. Bocock (1974: 37) defines ritual as “the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a

social situation to express and articulate meaning." The crucial feature of ritual as a medium of culture creation is the message it contains. But as Beattie (1966) notes, the crucial question about its role is not what does it do but what does it say. What it can say, of course, is that these are the central or peripheral values, the dominant or marginal people, the highly prized or less important goals and activities of this or that organization. It is partly through ritual that social relationships become stylized, conventionalized, and prescribed. It can create distinctiveness and exclusiveness and fashion order out of delineating the margins which separate the pure from the impure.

Just as ritual may provide a shared experience of belonging and express and reinforce what is valued, so myth also plays its crucial role in the continuous processes of establishing and maintaining what is legitimate and that which is labelled unacceptable in an organizational culture. Percy Cohen (1969: 337) has written that in popular usage the term myth is almost always intended pejoratively: "my beliefs are a strong conviction, yours a dogma, his a myth. Myths, in this view, are erroneous beliefs clung to against an evidence." Cohen defines myths in terms of their internal structure and the functions they perform. Thus they contain a narrative of events often with a sacred quality which explores in dramatic form issues of origin and transformation. In so doing they anchor the present in the past, offer explanations and, therefore, legitimacy for social practices and contain levels of meaning that deal simultaneously with the socially and psychologically significant in any culture.

Leach (1954) and Anthony Cohen (1975) while recognizing that myths have qualities that can reinforce the solidarity and stability of a system also argue that myths can be created and used in the furtherance of sectionalized interests. Leach views myth as a weapon deployed by individuals and ideological groupings to justify public and private stances and affirm wavering or aspiring power positions. Anthony Cohen connects myth even more directly with political processes, suggesting that myths justify and sustain values that underlie political interests, explain, and thereby reconcile the contradictions between professed values and actual behavior and legitimate established leadership systems faced with environmental threats. These value-imparting, justifying, and reconciling qualities of myths are precisely the ones that would suggest that the concept of myth has a powerful analytical role to play in studies of the creation of organizational cultures.

In describing and defining the various forms and functions of symbols, language, ideologies, beliefs, rituals, and myths, it should be recognized that these concepts are to varying degrees interdependent and that there is some convergence in the way they relate to functional problems of integration, control, and commitment. These concepts direct attention toward the mobilization of consciousness and purpose, the codification of meaning, the emergence of normative patterns, the rise and fall of systems of leadership and strategies of legitimization. It is through such mechanisms and processes that culture evolves, and indeed the ever fluctuating state which we describe as an organizational cul-



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ture then acts as a determinant or constraint on the way further attempts to handle issues of purpose, integration, and commitment are handled. Man creates culture and culture creates man.

## **THE ENTREPRENEUR IN HIS CONTEXT**

Through the focus on the creation of organizational culture, we can more easily come to understand both aspects of the entrepreneur's leadership role and the emerging context which inevitably places bounds on that leadership role. I earlier emphasized the limitations of approaching the study of entrepreneurship entirely through the analysis of personality profiles. The focus on entrepreneurs in terms of sets of needs and abilities tends both to overly emphasize the personal qualities of entrepreneurs and to forget that those qualities have to be mobilized and made effective within a particular institutional context. The leadership component of entrepreneurship, therefore, is not just concerned with the explanation of the individual drive of the entrepreneur in terms of skills and opportunities, but also with the interactive processes between entrepreneurs and their followers and the more general processes through which purpose and commitment are generated and sustained within an organization. Thus the leadership aspect of entrepreneurship is a function of institutional dynamics and leader-follower relations as well as the skillful deployment of personal qualities.

### **Problems of Commitment**

The relationship of leadership to entrepreneurship may be analyzed under the guise of commitment mechanisms. One way to look at commitment is through a cultural approach. Following Kanter (1972) and Buchanan (1974) commitment is defined as the willingness of participants to give energy and loyalty to an organization, to be effectively attached to its goals and values and thereby to the organization for its own sake. The role of commitment mechanisms is partly to disengage the person from some of his preexisting attachments and to redirect his system of language and beliefs and the patterning in his social relationships toward the organization's needs and purposes. In this way, a set of disparate individuals are fashioned into a collective whole.

But to study commitment mechanisms begs the question of commitment to what. In the school "what" was not only the personal qualities of the entrepreneur but also the vision he had for his organization. Visions are not merely the stated purposes of an organization, though they may imply such purpose, but they also are and represent the system of beliefs and language which give the organization texture and coherence. The vision will state the beliefs, perhaps implying a sacredness of quality to them, use a distinctive language to define roles, activities, challenges, and purposes, and in so doing help to create the patterns of meanings and consciousness defined as organizational culture.

Critical to the success of a vision in "consciousness raising" in a new organization will be the credibility of its source and the form and process by which it is communicated. One would expect the potency of a vision to be conditional on the degree of simplicity and complexity with which it is

expressed, the extent to which it used rational or formal systems of language as distinct from highly expressive systems of language, and various stylistic considerations. Stylistic components of a vision which may be crucial might include the presence of a dramatically significant series of events, rooting the vision back into history and thus indicating the vision was much more than a fad, and using oppositions and their resolution as ways of boldly conveying messages. Visions with a simple yet ambiguous content, expressed in symbolic language with the appeal of a dialectic style are not only likely to be potent consciousness raisers but also flexible enough to survive and thereby validate events.

If visions are to be used by an entrepreneur as a potent mechanism for directing and influencing others the language contained within the vision is crucial. Visions may contain new and old terminology, sometimes using metaphors and analogies to create fresh meanings. Words can provide energy and raise consciousness. The capacity to use the full power of words — to make words walk — I suspect is one of the unexplored characteristics of successful entrepreneurs.

Pondy (1975) has discussed leadership as "a language game." He noted that language is one of the key tools of social influence and that a leader's effectiveness is likely to be influenced by the language overlap with his followers and by the extent to which a leader can create words that explain and thereby give order to collective experiences. This may be one of the key processes by which identity is given to an organization and therefore to which individuals can commit their emotions and energies.

Commitment may also derive from sacrifice (Kanter, 1968, 1972). Commitment-building processes involve persons detaching themselves from one set of options to go to another. They make sacrifices and investments. In a new organization the sacrifices may be giving up a secure career elsewhere, doing without expected standards of creature comforts and organizational resources and even building the new institution. The investments can be actual financial commitments and the extraordinary amounts of time and energy needed to build an institution. Investment is thus a process of tying a person's present and potential resources to the organization in exchange for a share of the organization's future acclaim and rewards.

These processes involving sacrifice and investment may also necessitate relinquishing or at least partly withdrawing from other relationships and beliefs. Social processes are set in motion whereby the individual actively moves toward building an exclusive world of primary contact and belief and withdraws from the more inclusive patterns that had existed before he joined the new organization. In this way a sense of communion or group consciousness may develop. Once formed, the newly exclusive community can reinforce this identity by various ecological devices. Building walls around the organization may be facilitated by geographical isolation but also by limiting contact from the inside out and the outside in. The school was very geographically isolated and had clear rules and rituals for handling the strangers who

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entered the organization and for inhibiting contact with the community outside. A new organization can also help to create a sense of exclusiveness and internal commitment through the development of a distinctive organizational vocabulary and idiosyncratic forms of dress. Finally, it may be possible for an organization to create a sense of institutional completeness, a set of beliefs reinforced by behaviors that practically all of life's needs can be at least partially satisfied within its bounds. The distinctive languages, dress, and institutional completeness were all present in the school.

Building commitment can involve action at the entry stage of the organization. The entrepreneur may initially be able to recruit on the basis of prior acquaintance and homogeneity of background. He may continue to recruit in a highly personalized fashion, insisting on seeing all potential employees and using the interview process as an opportunity to display his vision, personal drive, and presence. Once inside the new organization the employer is confronted with the emerging culture through the language, the performance and observation of everyday tasks, the regular contact, and the group rituals. In the school the rituals varied from dramatic public meetings, where organizational deviants were exposed, to the headmaster's breakfast.

In the school, myths also played their part in generating and sustaining commitment and in legitimating the entrepreneur's control over his organization. There were myths about the school's experience of persecution in relation to its social setting, about major victories and significant defeats in its history, and above all about the special qualities possessed by the entrepreneur. Many accounts were given in interviews of his extraordinary powers of empathy for other people.

There have been a number of assumptions in the preceding argument. One has been that employee commitment is a necessary condition for the success of a new organization. A second is that such commitments are not generated automatically out of interaction, but must be earned. Part of the earning will undoubtedly come from the energy and vision of the entrepreneur, from his personalized recruiting and through the language and style with which he communicates his vision. A vision becomes an ideology through the endorsement of the organization. The ideology can impart meaning, demand involvement and behavioral consistency, motivate the performance of routine tasks, and resolve the concerns of its people. Closely interwoven with these processes are the mechanisms of sacrifice and investment, the forms of boundary management and tendencies to institutional completeness, and the potential for community arising out of group rituals, homogeneity of background, and organizational myths.

## **SUMMARY**

The overall purpose of this paper has been to highlight in the language of social process some of the more cultural and expressive aspects of organizational life by introducing and illustrating some concepts widely used in sociology and anthropology but which have not yet been integrated

into the theoretical language of organizational behavior. The substantive problem used here to provide a focus for these concepts has been how are organizational cultures created? The problem has been approached through the concepts of symbol, language, ideology, belief, ritual, and myth. These concepts have been defined and some of their functions and analytical interconnections and overlaps distinguished. Attention has been drawn to their value not only in understanding the creation of new cultures, but also in unravelling the related processes by which entrepreneurs give energy, purpose, and commitment to the organizations they are bringing into being.

No suggestion is being made that these concepts are universally applicable across all organizations in differing institutional spheres. The works of Etzioni (1961), Goffman (1961), and Coser (1974) would seem to indicate these concepts are more likely to be useful in certain kinds of organizations than others. Caution is in order, however, before assuming this kind of cultural analysis is only applicable to educational, religious, correctional, or social movement type of organizations. The study by Pettigrew and Bumstead (1980) of how variations in organizational culture have affected the impact of organization development activities illustrates the use of the concepts in this paper in business organizations. In addition it is only recently (Pettigrew, 1977) that conceptual developments in the analysis of political processes in organizations have explored processes of legitimation and deligitimation, although there is a strong tradition of using symbolic analysis in political science (Edelman 1964; Graber 1976). More specifically claims are being made that the kinds of analyses made possible by these concepts are potentially useful in understanding the creation of organizational cultures, the leadership components of entrepreneurship, and how the problems of commitment are handled in organizations. This paper has only listed some items on a menu and put some of the items together in some simple dishes; it remains for others to broaden the menu and produce the *cordon bleu* meals.

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