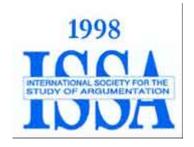# ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Cultural Reflections In Argumentation: An Analysis Of Survey Interviews

1. Introduction

For the analysis of corporate culture, researchers are in a habit to interview managers and employees, trying to find out how they experience, and relate to their work, and working conditions. Generally, researchers also use questionnaires in order to describe the organisation's culture. These questionnaires are partly based on the results of the interviews.

In order to find out as much as possible about the employees' and managers' views, researchers do not take a simple 'yes', 'no', or 'sometimes' for an answer. They want to know what underlies opinions, and are in need of explanations, because culture usually is not self-evident. Thus they keep on asking questions like 'Why is that?', 'How come?', or 'Can you give me an example?'. More often than not, interviewees are likely to explain their opinions, and to give *arguments* that *support their points of view*. Practical guides help researchers to prepare and conduct these kind of interviews.

What happens next? The researcher tries to assess the organisation's culture using concepts like 'formal versus informal hierarchy', 'pragmatic versus normative view of the work tasks', and interpreting the actual replies by using a scale model of sorts, that makes it possible to evaluate the answers, and to compare groups of employees with respect to the concepts used. The question is, however, *how* do researchers interpret the answers, e.g. the arguments that support the evaluations put forward by the interviewees? Are they able to make a connection between the culture they try to describe and the evaluations and arguments put forward? One should expect the researcher's interpretations to be presented in an explicit manner that allows others to find out how the researcher arrives at conclusions about the corporate's culture. Unfortunately, such an underlying rationale is most of the time completely lacking most of the time.

In order to bridge the gap between the data and their interpretation, I develop a comprehensive model for the interpretation of the interview responses. Starting with evaluations (concerning work, working conditions, hierarchy, etcetera), I

analyse the arguments interviewees put forward to support evaluations. I develop a taxonomy of arguments, based on the modal perspective of evaluative utterances. Finally, I try to relate this taxonomy of arguments to concepts of the organisational culture.

2. Organisational culture and evaluations

Researchers investigating the culture of an organisation, must have some idea about the concept of a corporate culture. It is hard to find a description of 'corporate culture' that is widely accepted by researchers, but usually the definitions contain elements like 'behavioural regularities', 'commonly defined problems', and 'collective understandings' (Schein 1986: 6; Frost 1985: 38). In the course of their investigation, researchers try to connect what they observe – the employees' behaviour – with what the employees think -the employees' cognitions. This connection is related to the theory of organisational culture that is used for the description, it describes and explains the relation and the organisational artefacts and the underlying cognitions (Schein (1986), Robberts and O'Reilly (1974), Sanders and Neuijen (1989) and Reezigt (1996)). For instance, who is communicating to whom and why to that employee, what is the frequency of their communication and why, how do they think they are able to the influence the organisation's policy the way they prefer, are seen as indicators of one of the most important aspects of a corporate culture, 'group relations' and 'group membership'.

We are able to observe who is communicating to who, we may count each time one employee phones another employee of the same department, but we cannot see and understand why they are doing things this way. So researchers have to ask questions to find out why things are going as they are, questions that are likely to provoke answers that contain the intended elements: a *specific artefact* so it is clear what we are talking about, a judgement about that artefact and an explanation of this *judgement*. This *explanation* is an essential part of the intended answers, because it gives the researcher the information he or she is looking for, it reflects the values and norms that underlie the employee's points of view, it makes it clear why the employee comes to a certain conclusion. These underlying values and norms are believed to be the essence of a culture: according to Schein, these are the basic assumptions that in fact constitute the culture (1986: 14).

To find out how we can make a reconstruction of answers in order to describe the

corporate culture, we will have to take a closer look at value judgements. Bax (1985) developed a model for the analysis of value judgements. In short, this model relates what is evaluated (the *evaluatum*), the expression of a value judgement (the *evaluation*) and the underlying norm (the *evaluation standard*). A value judgement can be seen as the result of the following mental tasks (Bax en Vuijk 1995: 61):

– the speaker must determine the point of view from which he considers a given or chosen evaluatum;
– he must select a proper evaluation standard (a norm or a rule);
– he must relate the qualities of the evaluatum to that standard.

The outcome of this process (a sort of 'calculation process') is be the verbal expression of a value judgement. The answers thus express the speaker's opinion, the speaker's attitude towards an artefact, and may also reflect the norm that is used. *May,* because it is not a necessity, people may express opinions without explaining how they came to a specific point of view or without making clear what qualities of the evaluatum have been related to the standard. Fortunately, in interview sessions people are very likely and willing to give that kind of explanations, so researchers do not have to push them hard to find out how they think. If necessary, questions like 'how come' and 'why do you think that?' usually do the trick.

To give an example: an employee is asked about his relations to his collegues and his boss, one of the items the researcher puts under 'group relations'. The employee states that his relation to his boss is 'quite good', mainly because 'he communicates in a very direct way' to his subordinates. In his answer, this employee makes it clear that he has a pro-attitude towards his boss, he evaluates this relation positively ('quite good'). We are able to reconstruct the employee's evaluation 'quite good' as the result of a calculating process in which he selected a *specific* standard, let us say an *efficiency* standard. The more direct the boss acts towards his subordinates, the less words he uses to let his subordinates know what he wants them to do, the more *efficient* he works, and the more positively the employee evaluates his boss.

The outcome of the calculation is not 'good', but '*quite* good'. Although it is difficult to give a precise interpretation of such expressions, it is clear that the boss is, in the eyes of the employee, not yet fully efficient in the way he communicates, but he is getting there. For this calculation, the employee may use a scale model of sorts: 'If a boss (or: if someone) is direct in his communication

strategies toward his subordinates, then the relation with that boss (with that person) is good'. The calculation goes something like this: 'Most of the time my boss uses direct communication strategies, so my relation with him is quite good'. If we have interviews with more subordinates of this specific manager, all sharing this employee's point of view and specific standard, we can assume a 'collective understanding': the employees use the same perspective on the way this division is managed, share the same efficiency standard, or the 'pragmatic' standard, or they share 'work-related relations' (Sanders and Neuijen (1989)). So they define (hierarchical) relations firstly as more or less efficient ways to achieve organisational goals, and not (primarily) in terms of 'human-relations', in terms of 'warmth', 'loveliness' and 'understanding'.

So, a closer analysis of what employees and managers evaluate, and, especially, of the *evaluation* standards they use, makes the relation between what people say in interview sessions, and the underlying rationale, more explicit. Nevertheless, it still is difficult to find out what evaluation standard is used, and it is also difficult to relate these standards with concepts of culture. In the next section I will focus on the analysis of argumentation, which may help to find the appropriate evaluation standards.

3. Evaluation standards and warrants

In the interview the employee is asked to explain his evaluation. In the previous section, it was stated that "This explanation is an essential part of the intended answers, because it gives the researcher the information he or she is looking for, it reflects the values and norms that underlie the employee's points of view, it makes it clear why the employee comes to a certain *conclusion*." The evaluation of the artefact can be seen as a conclusion and the interviewee *accounts* for this: the employee that was asked about his relations to his collegues and his boss *concluded* that his relation to his boss is 'quite good', *because* 'he communicates in a very direct way' to his subordinates. The interviewee tries to convince the researcher that his evaluation is accurate, that he came to a logical conclusion.

It is easy to see that the analysis of evaluations can benefit from a Toulmin (1958) analysis of argumentation: a *claim* (the evaluation he presents) is backed by *premises* (the facts chosen by the interviewee to support his claim), and the *warrant* (the evaluation standard he uses), an abstract rule that provides justifications which legitimate the inference of a claim from a premise (e.g. 'if..then..'). So an argumentation analysis of the boss-subordinate relationship fragment shows that the *claim* that the relation is 'quite good' is backed by the

premise (because) 'he communicates in a very direct way' to his subordinates'. The rule that legitimates the premise-claim inference will be the *warrant* 'If a boss (or: someone) is direct in his communication strategies toward his subordinates (other persons), then the relation with that boss (that person) is good'.

The speaker has several possibilities to be more or less explicit about his evaluation process or argumentation. As I have said before, this explicitness is related to the situation in which the interaction takes place: the survey or research interview. The interviewee is asked to back up his claim or evaluation by the researcher, and, considering the aim of the interview, it is very likely that he will do so. It is possible that he states one ore more premises, that he can use qualifiers to strengthen his commitment to the claim, that he may back the warrant by credentials or backing, that he will allow for acceptions and rebuttals. All these well known elements of Toulmin's model of argumentation can be used by the researcher to identify the position of the speaker towards the evaluation in a rather sophisticated way, and so, eventually, to specify the speaker's position towards the artefact the researcher likes to investigate. But, as claimed before, these elements seem to specify the speaker's position furthermore, a specification that is primarily based on the appropriate identification of the warrant. To identify the warrant seems to me the first and most important step to identify the organisational culture. The use of qualifiers, rebuttals, etcetera, are to be seen as part of a process of refinement: they help the researcher to conclude that this group of employees is to be characterised as *more or less* 'pragmatic' than the other group. So, first I will discuss the warrant identification: what type of warrants are of interest when we are looking for the company's culture?

4. Warrants and organisational culture
A warrant is, as said before, an abstract rule which provides the justifications which legitimate the inference of a claim from a premise: *if* a premise, *then* this claim is justified. For the analysis of corporate culture, it is important to find a proper way to identify this abstract rule. The identification has to be based on the theory of organisational culture used by the researcher. From a methodological point of view, the theory of organisational culture has to become part of the *analytic frame* used for the analysis of the data (Ragin 1994: 56). The research is aimed at the analysis of the culture, so the researcher is aimed at finding evidence that can be used for his analysis.

Theories of organisational culture may vary in the artefacts they include, in the way the connection between artefacts and underlying ideas is understood, and the nature of the dimensions that are used to describe the culture of an organisation, but they seem united in the acceptance of the idea that behaviour is related to underlying basic assumptions and that they want to describe and understand what is done and what is not done, and why it is done this way, in the organisation or in parts of the organisation, like departments.

To find out what is done and not done, and why it is done this way, the arguments that support the evaluative claims should be considered from a moral perspective: people are asked to describe what they think is – in this (part of) the organisation – *morally* right or wrong, good or bad, better or worse, ought to be or ought not to be, etcetera. So the evaluation standards used should be considered moral standards.

Three basic moral standards are distinguished (Velasquez 1982: 9):
– Principles of *utility*, which evaluate behaviour in terms of the net (social) benefits they produce;
– Principles of *rights*, which evaluate behaviour in terms of the protection they provide for the interest and freedom of individuals;
– Principles of *justice*, which evaluate behaviour in terms of how equitably they distribute benefits and burdens among members of a group.

Velasquez extensively enunciates these principles as a theory of ethical principles in business. As far as internal organisational relations are concerned, he explores problems raised by life within business organisations, the employee's and employer's duties, rights and organisational politics (302-303, and sections 8.2 – 8.6). Below I will be more explicit about the relation between these three principles and organisational culture, and give some examples of the analysis of evaluations, argumentation and warrants.

Utility
When the moral principles of *utility* are used, behaviour is evaluated in terms of the net benefits it produces: these benefits should outweigh the costs. I will not go into detail about 'traditional' utilitarianism which does not, and utilitarianism which does, include 'social benefits and costs' (see Velasquez 1986: 45-49 and 239-241), but simply state that not all costs and benefits can be restricted to economic values (like money) and that other factors, that can not be measured easily, should nevertheless be taken into account.

The principles of utility are often assumed the best way to evaluate *business decisions* (46). People seem to expect that almost every decision in a company is based on utilitarian evaluations: the benefits should be maximised, the costs should be minimised. The concept of business, of the organisation, seems closely related to the usage of utilitarian principles.

Organisational culture theories often use characteristics like 'goal related', 'work or job oriented', 'professional', the use of 'pragmatic views', 'discipline first', etcetera, to express the utilitarian way of evaluating actions as the dominant view in an organisation.

The following example may illustrate the use of utilitarian warrants. A production manager is asked about the meetings he attends.

Q: "Are the meetings in this organisation useful, what are you doing during this meetings, what are you talking about with your subordinates?"

A: "Nowadays they are useful, we just use these meetings to discuss problems, we only talk about work related items, we must think about our work and try to find solutions, to deal with problems. And we must all deal with problems the same way, otherwise we end up having new problems, other problems we have to deal with first."

The evaluation 'the meetings are useful' is backed by the arguments that the manager and his subordinates 'talk about problems, work related items' 'find solutions to problems' and that 'everyone deals with problems the same way'. The warrant 'if a meeting is about finding solutions to problems then a meeting is useful' can be seen as a utilitarian warrant, because using a meeting just for 'finding solutions to a problem' is a way of maximising the benefit (the solution) at minimum costs (not spending time on the social aspects of a meeting).

Of course, it is also important to note that the evaluation is 'useful', and not 'not useful', or 'very useful', or 'useless' (which may be very likely alternatives). In my opinion, for the analysis of the organisational culture, the main point is that the evaluation is based on an utilitarian standard, that a utilitarian warrant is 'used' to justify the claim.

Rights

When moral principles of *rights* are used, people evaluate behaviour in terms of the protection they provide for the interest and freedom of individuals: people have rights that should not be violated, no matter the costs that are to be made – in that way, rights 'overrule' utilitarian principles. Velasques, who dedicates an

important part of his book to this part of moral reasoning, mentions the following important rights of employees: the right to privacy (1986: 321), the right to freedom of conscience and whistleblowing (324), the right to participate (326) and the right to due process (325). In general, when people use arguments that can be translated to warrants like 'I act like this, because I feel I have the right to do so' principles of rights are used.

The following examples may illustrate the use of rights warrants. A surgeon is asked about group relations and group identity.
Q: "Do you consider yourself primarily to be part of the management team of this hospital or to be part of team of the consulting physicians?"
A: "Nowadays I must see myself primarily as one of the executives, as part of the management team indeed, mainly because of the way I see my duties as a manager, because I think that I have to devote myself a hundred percent to the management part of my job".

The surgeon, nowadays part of the management team of a hospital, argues that he sees himself primarily as an employee who has the right to devote himself a hundred percent to his managerial duties. 'If I think that I must devote myself a hundred percent to the management part of the job, then I am primarily an executive' can be seen as a 'rights warrant', because the surgeon he has the right, the obligation, to devote himself completely to the management part of his job: he has no choice, if he wants to do the job properly, he *has* to spend every minute to this part of his job.

A production manager is asked about the dependency relations between his tasks and the tasks of his boss.
Q: "About your tasks as a production manager: are you able to perform those tasks independently?"
A: "O yes, yes I really am, in this area of the factory one is expected to do all sorts of things independently, one has to arrange one's affairs oneself, and it suits me quite well: I hate having a boss looking over my shoulder constantly – he occasionally does, but not in an annoying way."

The production manager more or less says he acts independently because he has the right to do so, he has the right to arrange his affairs himself, and his boss is not in a position to violate that right. 'If one is able to arrange one's affairs oneself, then one is able to perform one's task (really) independently' can be seen

as the use of a rights warrant, because the manager protects his way of acting during his work from the influence of his boss: he does not have the moral right to look over his shoulder and say what he is doing right or wrong.

Justice
When moral principles of *justice* are used, people evaluate behaviour in terms of how equitably , or fair, benefits and burdens are distributed among members of a group. In an organisation, one is able to distribute the tasks to be performed by a group of people in a more or less fair way: usually, every employee with the same position should perform the same tasks and receives the same income. It is seen as unfair when an employee must perform more tasks or has more duties and does not get more money. This distributive justice is the most important and basic category (76).

The second category is retributive justice, which refers to the "just imposition of punishments and penalties upon those who do wrong" (76). An organisational subculture (like a department) not only specifies what is done, but also what is not done and what actions are to be taken to impose penalties. Thirdly, compensatory justice describes the compensation that one should receive when someone is wronged by others.

A production employee is asked about the discussions during the meetings he and his collegues attend.
Q: Someone said to me not every team's shift ends exactly at 11 PM? Is that true?
A: That is true, we all finish work at 10.45. We used to finish at 11, but one team one time left at 10.45. They didn't clean the place, they went to the showers and left, leaving the mess to the next shift. They didn't want to do all the cleaning work for them, so the protested. But no one did anything, so they didn't want to do the cleaning either. Now nobody does anymore, of course, I don't do things for them anymore.

It is clear that because one team finished work at 10.45, and did not want to do the cleaning work until 11, none of the groups want to do the cleaning work anymore, they want to distribute the burden – 15 minutes of cleaning the working place – equally, all the teams do that task, or they do not want to clean at all. 'If they don't have to spend 15 minutes to clean the working place, the we don't have to do that either' seems to be the underlying 'justice warrant': they want all the teams to be treated the same way.

5. Conclusion

Organisational culture is *expressed* in survey interviews by evaluations, and by arguments. Because organisational culture is described as a pattern of 'underlying ideas', norms and values, the warrants (or the evaluations standards), that specify the relation between the evaluation and the arguments, may be seen as indicators of organisational cultures. If we see warrants as indicators of organisational culture, we should analyse a warrant in terms of *moral reasoning*, so we should specify the relation between the evaluation and the arguments as use of a utility standard, a rights standard or a justice standard.

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