Chapter 2
Neo–Tribes or Subcultures?
The Nature of Subcultures in Large Complex Organizations

Nick Chandler

Budapest Business School, Hungary

ABSTRACT

Two contrasting views exist regarding subcultures: the classical view and the post-subcultural perspective of subcultures as "neo-tribes." However, there is scarcity of empirical studies of organizational studies with the latter perspective. This study aims to examine whether there is sufficient evidence for subcultures to be considered as "neo-tribes." To answer this question, empirical studies are examined alongside data from a recent quantitative study of staff in a higher educational institution. It is found that organizational subcultures have a floating membership, heterogeneity between members within subcultures, the absence of distinct boundaries, and changing values over time. It is concluded that, for practitioners, change in organizations will require managers to accept the continuous change, reassessment, and adaptation of subcultures, as well as a lack of cultural predictability and stability. For researchers, this study heightens the need to reassess studies opting for a suitable approach in identifying and examining organizational subcultures.

INTRODUCTION

In society we see the emergence of a range of subcultures and if we take on the assumption of Gregory (1983) that large complex organisations are to resemble the society around us, there is also a strong likelihood of the emergence of subcultures. From a practitioner's perspective, subcultures can severely impede or hasten change (Boisnier and Chapman, 2002). From a theoretical perspective, the underlying question is what form these subcultures may take in terms of the characteristics and basis for formation. To fully understand subcultures in organisations at the present time, it is necessary to consider the roots from which current subcultural theory has grown.

Much of subcultural theory is based on the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) approach, which maintains the view that subcultures are static, class-based formations. However, this approach has been criticised as too rigid (Weiner, 2015) and is in stark contrast to a post-subcultural approach that entertains the concepts of 'neo-tribes', 'scenes' and 'lifestyles' (Bennet, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, sociological studies have questioned a classical concept of subcultures (e.g. Bennet, 2011; Weiner, 2015) and suggested a fresh approach: a post-modernist view of subcultures as 'post-subcultures' or 'neo-tribes' (see Hesmondhalgh, 2005).

Whilst debate continues regarding these perspectives (Williams, 2019), few empirical studies have been undertaken in organisational culture studies from the perspective of neo-tribes. Much of the theory is based on a general societal context, and specifically based upon youth cultures and criminal cultures. In an organisational context, there are a limited number of studies of subcultures, and few, if any, consider the necessity for a post-subcultural approach, despite this debate between approaches being ongoing for well over a decade. One study that dwells upon the possibility of using post-subcultural theory in a business or organisational context is that of Hardy and Robards (2015), who reflect on the application of the concept of neo-tribes to tourism. Their findings indicate a need for understanding consumer tribes that were once referred to as subcultures, through adopting a 'neo-tribal approach'. Nonetheless, there is an evident research gap in studies using a fresh approach to organisational culture studies in the form of a 'post-subcultural approach'.

Considering one example, Becher (1989) referred to 'tribes with their territories' and entertained the idea of emergent sub-subcultures, based upon specialisations in higher education, yet this increased complexity of subcultures has been overlooked in organisational research with the only studies focussing on sub-subcultures originating in the fields of criminology and society (e.g. Alkemade, 2014). The concept of building and transferring between organisational subcultures (Wilkinson & Bruch, 2014) further indicate the flexibility and fluidity of subcultures and heighten the need to consider a post-subcultural approach. In essence, a rigid view of subcultures needs to be reassessed as a means to deepening our understanding of the complexity and dynamic nature of subcultures (Boisnier & Chatman, 2002) in organisations.

This study aims to answer the questions: 'Is there sufficient evidence of the nature of subcultures in large complex organisations to be considered as 'neo-tribes'? – and if so, what are the implications for researchers and practitioners. After a review of the operational definitions used in this study, the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of both a classical and 'neo-tribal' perspective are presented as means of distinguishing these two perspectives. Following this, we examine the evidence from existing studies into organisational subcultures for these two perspectives. Finally, we investigate the findings of a quantitative study to examine if the nature of subcultures in a large complex organisation could be considered as neo-tribes or classical subcultures, followed by a discussion of the findings, conclusions and implications of the study.

Related Content

Information Management in Project Management: Theoretical Guidelines for Practical Implementation
Fernanda Ribeiroand Armando Malheiro da Silva (2015). *Handbook of Research on Effective Project Management through the Integration of Knowledge and Innovation (pp. 44-57).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/information-management-in-project-management/124710

Surprise Toys to Build Customer Loyalty Using Classical Conditioning
Ritika Gaubaand Shefali Srivastva (2022). *International Journal of Applied Management Theory and Research (pp. 1-12).*
www.irma-international.org/article/surprise-toys-to-build-customer-loyalty-using-classical-conditioning/300279

Decision of Suppliers and Consumers of Credence Good in Quality Food Markets
Manoj Kumar (2016). *International Journal of Food and Beverage Manufacturing and Business Models (pp. 49-62).*
www.irma-international.org/article/decision-of-suppliers-and-consumers-of-credence-good-in-quality-food-markets/163275

ArghCompetence Recognition and Self-Concept of Employees on Motivation and its Impact
Irwan Usman, Haris Maupa, Sitti Haeraniand Muhammad Idrus Taba (2020). *International Journal of Applied Management Theory and Research (pp. 48-60).*
www.irma-international.org/article/arghcompetence-recognition-and-self-concept-of-employees-on-motivation-and-its-impact/244219

Does an Open Source Development Environment Facilitate Conventional Project Management Approaches and Collaborative Work?
Richard Garling (2018). *Information Technology as a Facilitator of Social Processes in Project Management and Collaborative Work (pp. 99-123).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/does-an-open-source-development-environment-facilitate-conventional-project-management-approaches-and-collaborative-work/207145