

## Reinventing intervention

Marcel B. Veenswijk

*Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Culture, Organisation and Management, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081c, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*  
Tel.: +31 20 4446732; Fax: +31 20 4446860; E-mail: m.veenswijk@fsw.vu.nl

### 1. Introduction

Dear Reader,

It is a pleasure to present the first issue of *Intervention Research*, an international journal dedicated to the study of Culture, Organization and Management. The principal aim of this new journal is to establish a platform for organizational (culture) scholars with a special interest in intervention and cultural change processes in organizations.

Processes of corporate intervention have been attracting a good deal of interest in recent years from academics, consultants and managers, especially those who are active in the fields of corporate behavior and psychology, business studies and economics. Meantime, the intervention theme has also gained – albeit on a modest scale – the attention of people who are primarily interested in the cultural dimension of corporate ties. However, as an organizational concept, intervention is highly charged and, as an academic theme, it has become conflated with instrumental-cum-managerial ideas on the manipulability and manageability of work processes. Intervention studies in the research on partnerships between persons have focused mainly on deliberate efforts to influence individual and collective behavior and on modeling corporate ideologies and cultures according to fixed formulae and success factors. Typical icons in this field, such as Ouchi [14], Deal and Kennedy [7] and Peters and Waterman [16], need no introduction. Cultural intervention thus became an important theme in the debate on modernization and was solved once and for all with the insight that “there is a general recognition that this interrelated set of modernist beliefs is slowly losing its commanding sense of validity” [9].

So why bring out a new journal on this theme? Many of the current journals which address the themes of cultural change and management of meaning are not only instrumental in their approach, they also ignore the connection between (often paradoxical) contextual/societal developments and new successful management concepts

and strategies. What is more, so far relatively little empirical data has been presented on cultural reorientation, survival and the attendant 'coping strategies' of individuals and organizations in the 'new, late-modern organization'. Many publications and books on this theme appear to legitimize the type of organization in which the managerial standpoint is presented as central, in both practical and moral terms [5].

Although we still have only limited knowledge of how individuals in organizations (both managers and personnel) react to societal processes of differentiation, individualization and even fragmentation, dominant doctrines of organizational change usually have a strong 'one best way' character and are based on assumptions of homogeneity and manageability [2,3,13]. This journal relates issues of cultural change in terms of analysis and prescription to paradoxes in the late-modern society. These paradoxes are bound up with increasingly permeable borders within and around organizations and the rise of transnational corporations. As globalization progresses, relationships of dependence get more complex. The dividing lines between social domains become (porous and) blurred and are no longer effective as a system of orientation. Physical borders, frontiers in time and space, city boundaries, demarcation lines around industries and organizations, and symbolic borders, defined by values and norms, identities, meanings and rules are being constantly opened up to discussion. They raise questions about society and the course of societal change: in a globalizing world homogenization and westernization versus diversification and hybridization; regionalization and localization of identities, lifestyles, management styles and organizational cultures form part-converging and part-conflicting processes which highlight the issue of cohesion in society and the organization of diversity [4]. Individuals and groups are finding it harder to get their bearings in this complex and constantly changing world with all the risks it entails [1].

Besides exploring processes within organizations, this journal will also address processes and relationships between organizations. Such attention is legitimized by the emergence of the network society and the transnational processes of social change which are increasing cross-border collaborations between private organizations on the one hand and private and public organizations on the other [5,12]. This is accompanied by processes that institutionalize the relationship between private and public organizations at local, national and transnational level. Partnerships between national and multinational corporations are stimulated and facilitated or else held back by state, supra-state or non-governmental organizations. As a result, greater importance is attached to the management of inter-organizational relationships and networks and to the dialogue with politico-administrative bodies [6].

*Intervention Research* will present papers that connect contextual developments to organizational change programs, and intervention strategies to individual coping strategies characterized in terms of uncertainty and ambiguity. It will reflect on key questions such as: How do workers react in different situations (such as front-stage versus backstage) in their official capacity and as human beings (assuming these two roles can be treated differently)? What kind of (temporal) alliances do they establish? What are the implications of diversification *and* fragmentation processes (in terms of gender and ethnicity) for organizational dynamics and stability?

## 2. Sources of inspiration for scholars of corporate intervention and cultural change

Although intervention scholars have used many theoretical premises as a basis for their ideas, perspectives and frameworks, two (partially) contrasting sources of inspiration can be singled out as the foundations upon which approaches to intervention and cultural change have developed. On the one hand, a close connection exists between the functional theory and what can be called an *instrumental* approach to intervention and cultural change. This – according to Parker [15] – managerial culturalistic approach can be contrasted with an *interpretive* type of intervention analysis, which stems from phenomenology and social construction theory and forms an important basis for most of the contributions to this new journal.

### 2.1. The instrumental approach

As noted before, the *instrumental approach* to intervention and cultural change has developed primarily in organizational and business sciences. It assumes that corporate culture can be deliberately influenced, especially by the manager, who is identified as the prime carrier and agent of change in organizational culture [17]. As highlighted by McKinsey researchers, Deal and Kennedy [7] and Peters and Waterman [16], this approach has been honed and developed by many organizational theoreticians and applied to many organizational change projects. In essence, the instrumental approach to cultural intervention contains three elements that underline the (one-sided) system-orientation towards intervention: (1) cultural change functions in a way that assists the survival of the organizational system as a whole; (2) interventions are demarcated at the level of patterns of behavior: ‘the way we do things around here’; (3) research focuses primarily on regularities in how change programs ‘work out’ in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Though this approach has met with considerable success in recent years – especially when it comes to compressing organizational (change) processes into manageable entities and generating attractive management language – its academic fruits have been disappointing so far. Not only do intervention analyses frequently result in oversimplification, the fixation on a ‘healthy’ corporate cultural system leads to circuitous arguments. If the starting point is the needs of the system and not the social action (as in the case of the interpretive approach) instrumental analysis runs the risk of becoming tautological: the cultural system exists because of functional action; hence, cultural action is functional because the cultural system exists.

### 2.2. The interpretive approach

The interpretive approach to cultural intervention, which was developed primarily in cultural sociology and organizational anthropology, does not so much strive to formulate recommendations on ‘optimal cultures’ as to understand and explain the

Table 1  
Approaches to cultural change and intervention

	Instrumental	Interpretive
Function	optimization	reflection
Content	patterns of behavior	webs of significance
Domain	sub-system	root-metaphor
Paradigm	positivism	Constructivism

rich patterns that develop in and around organizations. The interpretive approach to corporate cultures has three basic elements that can also be found in the phenomenological approach: (1) cultural change is not approached managerially, but reflexively; (2) organizational culture is demarcated on the level of webs of signification; (3) research does not focus on patterns but on the (subjective) *Verstehen* of organizations.

As in most tables, the two approaches distinguish themselves from each other in an ideal typical sense. That means that a number of theories on organizational culture can be placed somewhere in between these two perspectives or use both of them.

### 3. Reinventing intervention as an interpretive concept

In the interpretive approach, the study of cultural change and intervention does not aim to formulate recommendations for ‘optimal cultures’. In line with phenomenology, culture and identity have much more reflexive connotations. These relate to the reconstruction of the perception of reality that has developed within organizational ties: the focal point is the (shared) experience of members of the organization. From this perspective, social action is regarded as value-oriented and organizational ties aim to support these orientations [20]. When it comes to functionality, the organization loses its instrumental value and intervention capacity and becomes a subjectively constructed framework for action. Following on from Smircich [18] Martin [13] and Jeffcutt [10] we can culturally characterize this view as a root-metaphor. Intervention programs in social environments become cultural phenomena that should be studied within their social context. Essentially, this harks back to what Schein [17] describes as the set of basic assumptions upon which all organizational behavior is based. An interpretive analysis does not regard concepts and points of departure on efficiency and effectiveness as neutral entities. The norms that are related to these concepts are more likely to be the object of research than a part of the phenomenon of ‘the organization’. In this sense, organizations become – as Geertz [8] sees it – the product of sense-making processes: they contribute largely to and are themselves a useful coherent entity of these processes. Thus, according to Weber [19], the *verstehen* of motives is central.

Although many interpretive research studies neglect the possibilities of an intervention methodology from a reflexive perspective, culture, management and change

may be more interrelated than suggested in most contributions on interpretive cultural theory. The ethnographic study by Gideon Kunda's *Engineering Culture* [11] is a classic example in which this interrelation is effectively studied in terms of control and commitment in a high-tech company.

The interpretive approach to intervention is closely linked to the idea that every action can be understood and interpreted in terms of the logic and frameworks applied by corporate players. This perspective offers unlimited possibilities for exploring interventions in organizational settings – not just for the academic but also, and more importantly, for the manager-practitioner who wants to reflect on the social configurations in which he moves and who wants to free himself from the ‘one best way’ models which have tied him down in recent years. The articles in this new journal will be strongly characterized by this interpretive source of inspiration.

#### 4. About this issue

The basis for this first issue of *Intervention Research* was provided by the EGOS congress in 2003, where Paul Bate, Frans Kamsteeg and Harry Wels organized a session on Anthropological Perspectives on Power, Performance and Organizational Politics. The papers presented at this meeting formed a powerful incentive to look at (managed) processes of corporate change from a fresh perspective and to reflect on the tensions and contradictions in concrete cases and how they are handled by the players. In the articles in this first issue, which are based on the papers presented at the EGOS congress, ostensibly highly divergent cases are addressed from the perspective of corporate intervention. In the first article Kamsteeg and Wels, who are also guest editors of this issue, set out an organizational-anthropological model of organization and intervention in which the core concepts are symbolism, culture, identity and power. Kamsteeg and Wels maintain that sensibility is the first step towards realizing a direct influence on sense-making processes. The article by Paul Bate shows that specific communities of practice during change processes in a hospital in the UK managed to give shape to these sense-making processes and express them as inspirational, mobilizing narratives. As Garcia shows in her article on a Spanish tire manufacturing plant, communities which are taken over time and again by (often foreign) firms establish a fundamental basis that prevents organizational ties from fragmenting and at the same time are the drivers of renewal. In Spierenburg's article it seems at first that the macro context of the land reform is the driver of change, but here too we see that change comes about through complex interventions based on narratives and counter-narratives at different individual, social and organizational levels. The contribution by Eriksen concentrates mainly on what happens in terms of resistance to regulations when it is the same regulations that compel the cadets in the U.S. coastguard to follow a specific regime.

Jean Bartunek's contribution scarcely needs any introduction. In her commentary on the above-mentioned articles she is second-to-none in illustrating the crucial

importance of analyzing tensions and contradictions in organizational interventions. I entirely share her opinion that understanding and analysis of meaning processes and the accompanying narratives – though often paradoxical and full of ambiguity – are key themes in getting to grips with, but also in reinventing intervention methodologies in modern complex organizations.

## References

- [1] B. Adam, U. Beck and J. van Loon, eds., *Risk society and beyond, critical issues for social theory*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000.
- [2] M. Alvesson, *Cultural perspectives on organizations*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993.
- [3] J. Bartunek, The multiple cognitions and conflicts associated with second order organizational change, in: *Social Psychology in organizations: advances in theory and research*, J.K. Murnghan, ed., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1993, pp. 3220–349.
- [4] A. Bauman, *Essays in post-modern morality*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995.
- [5] M. Castells, *The information Age. The rise of the network society*, Volume I, Blackwell publishers, Oxford, 2000.
- [6] H. Dahles, Transborder Business: The ‘Capital’ Input in Singapore Enterprises Venturing into ASEAN and Beyond, Sojourn, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 17(2) (2003), 249–273.
- [7] T.E. Deal and A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures. The rites and rituals of corporate life*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts, 1982.
- [8] C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, Fontana Press, London, 1973.
- [9] K.J. Gergen and T.J. Thatchenkery, Organizational science in a post-modern context, in: *In the realm of organization, essays for Robert Cooper*, R. Chia, ed., Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 15–42.
- [10] P. Jeffcut, From interpretation to representation, in: *Postmodernism and organizations*, J. Hassard and M. Parker, eds, Sage, London, 1993.
- [11] G. Kunda, *Engineering Culture. Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*, Temple university press, Philadelphia, 1992.
- [12] K. Lee and J.M. Pennings, Mimicry and the market: adoption of a new organizational form, *The Academy of Management Journal* 45(1) (2002), 144–162.
- [13] J. Martin, *Organizational Culture, mapping the terrain*, Sage Publications Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, 2002.
- [14] W.G. Ouchi, *Theory Z: How American Business can meet the Japanese Challenge*, Addison Wesley, Reading, 1981.
- [15] M. Parker, *Organizational culture and identity*, Sage, London, 2000.
- [16] T.J. Peters and R.H. Waterman jr., *In search of excellence: Lessons from America’s best-run companies*, Harper & Row, New York, 1982.
- [17] E.H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 1985.
- [18] L. Smircich, Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28 (1983), 339–358.
- [19] M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Grundniss der verstehenden Soziologie, Mohr, Tubingen, 1985 (originally 1922).
- [20] K.E. Weick, *The social psychology of organizing*, Addison Wesley, Reading, 1979.