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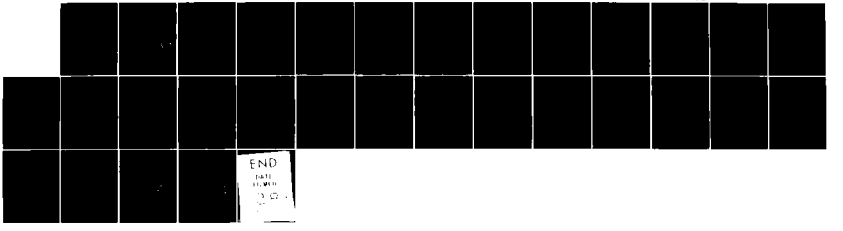

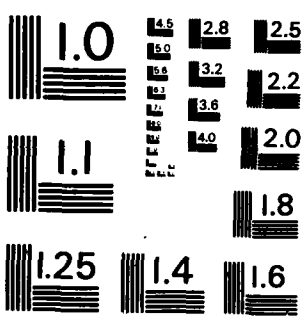

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Culture is defined as content that is characteristic of and/or peculiar to a group. Current interest in the cultures in and of organizations has focused on the content, and overlooked the boundaries of those contents; that is, the group to which the content is peculiar. This paper offers illustrations of the hazards of overlooking the boundaries of workplace cultures. It outlines what is entailed in taking seriously issues of boundary, as well as content of culture in work settings.

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"CULTURE: YES; ORGANIZATION: NO!"[1]

Meryl Reis Louis

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Sloan School of Management
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Department of Administrative Sciences
Naval Postgraduate School

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"CULTURE: YES; ORGANIZATION: NO!"

Much ado is made these days about corporate culture by organizational scientists and managers in government and industry. A premise prevalent in current formulations is that an organization is possessed of a single culture that is pervasive throughout the organization. My purpose here is twofold: (1) to challenge this premise -- hence the title "Culture: Yes; Organization: No!" and (2) to lay out an alternative view and trace its implications for examining cultures in work organizations.

That it is inappropriate to assume one culture per organization may be seen in the following illustrations. Recall the Bank Wiring Room in Elton Mayo's Hawthorne Studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). What had impact on the attitudes and behaviors of workers in the room was not some remote Hawthorne Electric culture, if one could have been documented. What had impact were the shared meanings that evolved and emerged from among the workers as they worked together on a regular basis, in face-to-face contact. These meanings were more potent that either the threat of job loss or the lure of additional pay associated with violating or complying with the clearly communicated formal procedures prohibiting job sharing, and specifying piece-rate incentivews for individual output levels beyond standard. Also, recall the situation in the coal mines,

as described by Trist and Bamforth(1951), before the longwall method was introduced. The work-group culture that emerged among people in the mines whose tasks were interdependent served the company's interests as a byproduct of serving the interests of work-group members. In both of the above cases, the cultures that had impact on the workers were contained within the larger organization. But in neither case could it be said that the effective culture was that of the organization at large, that is, an organizational culture.

What are the costs of assuming that an organization has a culture? What errors are associated with this assumption? Several types of errors can be identified. For instance, if one assumes that an organization has a culture, then it should not matter where one looks to find it or who one choses as informants from among the organization's members. In relying on this premise, one might develop a description of the organization's culture from talking with key executives and assume that the description applies throughout the organization. Or one might gather information from several hierarchical levels, geographic regions, and/or product division and combine the information from the various subsettings, rather than treat each as a site of potentially distinct culture.

Another error associated with the "organizational culture" assumption is that of attributing to the organization whatever cultural content is detected within the setting. This occurs,

for example, when the researcher discovers that employees at AVCO Bank of Anytown are "cautious", and concludes that a fundamental characteristic of AVCO's culture is caution. What the researcher has failed to consider is the possibility that he or she has in fact picked up a characteristic of Anytown's culture or of the banking industry's culture. Repercussions are obvious when one imagines using the researcher's description of the "organizational culture" as a basis for action or intervention. Changes made at AVCO Bank with the aim of transforming "caution" into "risk-taking" are unlikely to succeed in the long-term. In this case, the caution of the banking industry and/or town cultures would act as an inertial force undermining the change effort within the AVCO bank. Along the way, the action-taker has lost the benefits of working with those aspects of culture that specifically reflect the setting. Little action leverage comes from having identified any or all culture to be found within a setting.

Finally, by overlooking the relationships among various cultures internal to an organization, actions may be undermined. For example, consider the case of the proverbial tensions between sales and production groups. We would expect to find that each group's culture reinforces a somewhat negative orientation toward the other group. If we wished to reduce tensions, mandating "harmony" and imposing integrating structures would be unlikely to wholely succeed without our giving some attention to

subcultural reinforcers of historic tensions.

How, then, should one proceed, given the evidence that multiple cultures may arise in an organization and given the costs of erroneously assuming an organization has one culture and/or whatever culture is detected within an organization is culture of the organization? What issues ought to be considered if one is to avoid the "organizational culture" assumption? In the remainder of this presentation, these questions are addressed through discussion of: components of a definition of culture; the use of locus over unit of analysis for identifying arenas of culture within organizational settings; aspects of the penetration of a culture; inquiry processes that follow from this conceptual approach to culture in organizational settings.

COMPONENTS OF A DEFINITION

What is culture? A dictionary defines culture as:

> the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population; a style of social and artistic expression peculiar to a society or class. (American Heritage Dictionary, 1976:321)

What, then, is organizational culture? Sociologists Howard Becker and Blanche Geer have described it as follows:

> Any social group, to the extent that it is a distinctive unit, will have to some degree a culture differing from that of other groups, a somewhat different set of common understandings around which action is organized, and these differences will find expression in a language whose nuances are peculiar to that group. Members of churches speak differently from members of tavern groups; more importantly, members of any particular church or tavern group have cultures, and languages in which they are expressed, which differ somewhat from those of other groups of the same general type. (Becker and Geer, 1970:134)

A group's culture can be characterized as:

> A set of understandings or meanings shared by a group of people. The meanings are largely tacit among members, are clearly relevant to the particular group, and are distinctive to the group. Meanings are passed on to new group members. (Louis, 1980)

And it can be operationalized as:

> A set of answers to questions that arise in the everday negotiation of life at work for members of the group. For example: Who's who and who matters around here? Who's us? Who's them? How do we treat us and them? How do we do things around here and why? What constitutes a problem? What do we do when a problem arises? What really matters here and why? (Louis,1981:12)

The"answers" are product and process of an ongoing, though often hidden consensus-making activity that is heavily influenced by the traditions of past local consensus-making, both in terms of the process and products of consensus. Further, the "questions" are those typically addressed in group cultures; any of them may not be relevant to the particular group.

Three basic components of culture can be isolated from these definitions. First, there is some content: "the totality of

socially transmitted behavior patterns", "a style of social and artistic expression", "a set of common understandings". Second, there is a group: "a community or population", "a society or class", "a distinctive unit". Third, there is a relationship between the content and the group: content "characteristic of" the group, content "peculiar to" the group, content "differing from that of other" groups[2].

Anthropologists have long differed over the first component: the content. In fact, 30 years ago Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified 164 meanings of the term "culture" that had been used in anthropology by that time. Most of the meanings dealt with nuances of the content component. The other two components could be assumed and/or overlooked with little cost to their pursuits. More specifically, an anthropologist studying a "primitive tribe" in a remote geographic region could be fairly certain of which group had been studied, and that the particular content of culture identified was peculiar to that group. The historic as well as geographic isolation that often characterized the group under study alleviated the need for explicit efforts to establish the group's boundaries or to demonstrate that the culture described was peculiar to the group. Although organizational researchers and practitioners have followed suit, the consequences are likely to be far more dysfunctional, as indicated by the costs illustrated above. Quite simply, geographic and historic isolation are unlikely to characterize

groups in modern day work settings. Hence, organizational researchers cannot assume that, in identifying the cultural content to be found in an organization, they have identified the bounds of the group to which any bit of content is peculiar.

A final clarification of terms is needed. It concerns the the relationship between organization and culture. In this view, organizations are treated as settings that may foster the development of cultures. Organizations as settings are "culture-bearing milieux" in that they are regularly-con ing and provide opportunities for affiliation, out of which may me sets of shared understandings relevant and distinctive to some group (Louis, 1980).

The bulk of this presentation focuses on cultural boundaries — alternative sites at which cultures may emerge within organizations (locus of culture), and means of establishing their perimeters (penetration of culture). It does not focus on cultural contents, their structure — which Schein (1982) has considered — or their form and detection — on which Martin and her colleagues have done much work (1983, 1982).

LOCUS, NOT UNIT OF ANALYSIS

There are several sites or loci at which a culture may develop within a single organization. Recall the Bank Wiring Room in which two cultures developed. In addition, several threads of culture commonly found within an organization may reflect cultures that developed elsewhere, beyond the organizational boundaries. For example, consider industry cultures. These will be referred to as transorganizational loci of culture to indicate that they stem from beyond the organization in which they are observed.

The language of locus rather than unit of analysis is used as a reminder that an indigenous culture may or may not be manifested at any particular site. The presence of culture at a designated experiential site (e.g., a department) should be treated as an empirical question. "Unit of analysis" denotes an a priori determination and/or presumption of the existence of that which is being studied at a particular experiential site. In contrast, the term locus signals that the specific site in question is a potential experiential site; and that presence of some phenomenon in or at the site awaits empirical verification.

Intraorganizational loci of culture are shown in Figure 1. First, culture may develop around the top of an organization. At least three variants of culture at the top can be identified. In many cases, more than one variety of culture may have developed so that the one which has been detected bears clarification. The three variants are: an emergent "for-our-eyes-only" culture among

a ruling elite; a designed "for-public-consumption" culture that the ruling elite wishes to have passed down through the organization; an emergent and more public culture, but one that emanated from the top of the organization. This last variant is the primary, though often implicit, locus of culture reflected in current writings.

A second locus or experiential context in which culture may develop is a vertical slice of the organization, such as a division. The medical products division of Avery Instruments, for example, may have developed a culture that is somewhat different from that of the overall oranization or another division. A third locus of culture is the horizontal slice, such as a particular type of job or hierarchical level. For example, loan officers at Crocker Bank or systems engineers at IBM may have developed a culture.

Fourth, a particular unit such as a department may manifest a characteristic culture, for example, the Management Department at the ABC Business School. A fifth locus of culture is any group, regardless of whether members come from the same or different formal organizational units. The people who get together for bridge at lunch on Thursdays may develop a culture, for example, despite the fact that members span several departments and hierarchical levels. A sixth and final intraorganizational locus of culture is the overall organization. Ultimately, this locus of culture runs into the emergent and public culture emanating

from the top, the third variant of culture at the top discussed above. For instance, Hewlett-Packard employees across hierarchical levels and divisions may share a set of understandings.

Figure 2 depicts *transorganizational* loci of culture. These are "feeder" cultures, streams of culture flowing into organizations. An ethnic group within an organization may serve as a locus with a highly elaborated culture. For example, light industry in south central Los Angeles may amnifest a Chicano culture spanning several departments, divisions, and even corporate bounds.

In addition,industry may provide a substantial portion of the culture manifested within an organizational setting. For instance, commercial banks may have a strong common culture across individual banking organizations. A final transorganizational locus of culture is an occupation or profession. The legal department at Exxon, or the tool and die makers across departments at Ford Motor Company are illustrations.

With so many different experiential sites around which cultures may emerge, it is very easy to pick up some culture in a setting. The idea of a cultural blank slate in modern work organizations is meaningless. The problem of determining post hoc whose culture has been described is analogous to the problem

of naming factors generated in an exploratory factor analysis. The next section takes up this problem, fleshing out a set of empirical questions for establishing cultural boundaries, for determining the "reach" of a culture in a work setting.

PENETRATION OF CULTURE

Beyond recognizing the multiplicity of cultures possible within an organization, one needs to assess the penetration of any one culture. Through the issues of penetration, the subtasks of establishing the boundaries of a culture can be identified. Sociological, psychological, and historical aspects of penetration need to be examined in diagnosing cultures in organizations. In sociological terms, penetration translates into pervasiveness or the extent of reach through space of the culture. For example: How far down into the organization does the corporate level culture extend? At the level of first line supervisors, are top level prescriptions about developing subordinates manifested? These are the kinds of queries through which to establish the pervasiveness of a culture.

Psychological penetration refers to the consistency or homogeneity in interpretation of shared meanings among individuals in the group whose culture has been isolated. Is

there significant variation among group members' translations of shared understandings? Around what issues is there most variance in interpretation? --least variance? Through questions like these, the homogeneity of a culture can be empirically investigated.[3]

In general, the results of such an investigation can indicate how "tight a hold" over members the culture maintains, how narrow the interpretive bandwidth that is tolerated. More specifically, within-culture variance can provide clues to central themes and orientations of the locale. What does it mean if there is wide difference, for instance, among DIGITECH's technical representatives in "acceptable" career aspirations and negligible difference in "acceptable" means of pursuing one's aspirations? What might it mean if the reverse were the case? Interpretation of such differences falls out of the analysis when the investigator has thought to notice and follow up on this issue.

How does homogeneity differ from pervasiveness? What is the relationship between them? When concerned about pervasiveness, the questioner asks: Does "We Try Harder" (for purposes of illustration, considered to be an aspect of Avis culture) have special meaning for maintenance personnel as well as for sales personnel? Given that the answer is 'yes', that it is pervasive, homogeneity becomes the focus. When concerned about homogeneity, the questioner asks: What is the meaning of "We Try Harder" for

maintenance personnel and sales personnel? And how different are the meanings among and between maintenance and sales personnel? Interpretations among maintenance personnel may be very loose, or may be tight but have an anti-customer or anti-sales cast to them, or may mirror quite closely the interpretations given by sales personnel. Whether and how "We Try Harder" can be used as a ralleying point or integrator across sales and maintenance functions 10 years after its introduction depends in part on both its pervasiveness and the homogeneity of its interpretations.

Historical penetration calls attention to the stability over time of the set of shared understandings. "For how long has this practice been the status quo?" is the kind of query through which stability as an empirical concern can be pursued. Stability indicates the degree of entrenchment or embeddedness of understandings. As such, it is an important clue to enertia or potential resistance to change.

A final aspect of penetration bears consideration. In the past, the term "subculture" has been used to indicate relations among contemporaneous cultures. A finer-grained analysis can be achieved by attending to the direction and target of subcultures. We might hypothesize that, like individuals, groups and their cultures may orient toward, against or away from other groups and their cultures (Horney, 1942). "Toward, against, and away from" indicate direction of a culture vis a vis some target. The direction could be negative, as in what has been referred to

as a counter culture. Or it could be positive or enhancing of the target group, for instance, in a division culture that supports the goals of the overall organization. Or the direction could be neutral, in which case the culture may be inwardly rather than outwardly oriented. The culture that emerged among the workers in the coal mines (Trist and Bamforth, 1951) could be characterized as neutral, whereas in Hawthorne Electric's Bank Wiring Room, two somewhat negatively directed subcultures targeted at the other clique developed in the room.

Of what benefit is this finer-grained analysis? What is the advantage of knowing the direction and target of subcultures? Such detail provides a better basis for action. With knowledge of direction and target, the manager can dedicate resources to the trouble spots, or countercultures. The manager can likewise avoid frittering away resources on benign cultures or mistakenly disrupting positive or enhancing cultures.

Imagine having a cultural Geiger counter. This instrument would signal when we are at the center of one locus of culture and when we are moving out of range. We would pick up different loci on different channels of the Geiger counter, switching between channels to assess overlaps and nestings of loci. We would have a "meta" switch to shift our range guage from detecting sociological penetration (pervasivness) to detecting historical penetration (stability) or psychological penetration (homogeneity). Such an instrument is what we need for work with

cultures in organizational settings. In its absence as a physical fact, investigators might choose to retain the Geiger counter metaphor as a reminder of the issues to address in order to establish the boundaries of a culture and/or to determine the group whose culture one has detected.

INQUIRY PROCESSES

Inquiry processes that follow from this approach to culture in organizational settings are outlined in this section. Two routes are available for determining what cultural content is characteristic of and peculiar to a group. One route begins with the identification of a group of interest; perhaps it is Hewlett-Packard as an organization or the loan division of Crocker National Bank. The next step is to identify cultural content manifested at that site. See, for example, the work Martin and Siehl (1983), who have developed a multi-step method of observing and interviewing to generate a setting-specific questionnaire through which to identify local cultural content. The third step is to assess the penetration of cultural content. Each aspect of penetration bears assessing: pervasiveness, homogeneity, and stability.

One can work down, up, and out, so to speak in assessing

penetration. So, for example, in assessing the sociological penetration or pervasiveness of the loan division's cultural content (as detected using Martin's methods), the investigator looks down into subsidiary groups at lower hierarchical levels and within functional specialties of the division; the investigator looks up at the larger organizational unit(s) within which the loan division is embedded or nested; and the investigator looks out beyond the formal organizational boundaries at the banking industry and the local community in which the division is located. In each case, the investigator guages whether particular cultural content previously detected is also characteristic of these other sites.[4] Appreciation of the essence of culture peculiar to the division results from such an investigation. Distinctions, for example, between cultural content pervasive throughout the division and content found at the division level but not below, are revealed in this step of the inquiry process. The same sort of investigation is carried out for other aspects of penetration, as discussed in the previous section.

This route or sequence of steps in the inquiry process -- from group, to content, to penetration -- is most appropriate when the aim is to work with a pre-specified group(boundary). In contrast, when the aim is to work on a pre-specified issue, problem, or cultural theme (content), a different inquiry process makes sense.

For example, assume that the aim is to shift from "caution" to "risk-taking" as a basic response at AVCO Bank, as suggested in the illustration at the beginning of this presentation. It would be a mistake to assume either that "caution" is an AVCO-wide issue, or that it is merely an AVCO issue. Penetration, again, is an empirical issue. Looking up, down, and out may reveal pockets of "caution" within AVCO and support for "caution" within AVCO from the industry culture. Perhaps, "caution" is prevalent among those boundary-spanning units that interface with industry institutions. And perhaps, these are particularly powerful units within AVCO so that they set the tone in interactions with other units in the bank. Such an analysis informs the action-taker of leverage points toward which change efforts are most appropriately directed. With this inquiry process, then, the route is from content, to penetration, to group with the aim being to locate the group whose content has been identified a priori as being of interest.

An additional step in the inquiry process is to examine the orientation of and/or relationships among subcultures. Here, the issues of direction and target, as discussed in the previous section, come into play. Approaches for pursuing different aims in studying orientations of subcultures are illustrated here. A "pairwise" approach is useful when intergroup rivalries and specific problems of coordination have surfaced and now require diagnosis and action. The threads of each group's culture that

are reinforcing the hostilities would be identified. Then intergroup and team building techniques could be employed to manage the tensions.

A second approach is to take a single group, detect and test hunches about its orientations, and, if any target group(s) is implicated, trace backto that group to assess mutual impacts of the intergroup orientations. For instance, in the Bank Wiring Room case, it is commonplace to view the cliques as anti-Hawthorne Electric, as having a negative orientation toward the larger organization. However, review of the data suggests that the orientation of clique A, was not negatively directed at the larger organization per se. Although the consequences of clique A's practices may have been dysfunctional for the larger organization, those consequences were a by-product rather than the result of "intentions" to undermine organizational purposes. Actions taken to reduce dysfunctional consequences would differ significantly depending on one's understanding of the orientation of the group's culture, that is it's target and direction.

CONCLUSION

The key points made in this presentation have been the following:

- Culture is defined as (1) some content that is (2) peculiar to (3) a group.

- Anthropologists and organizational scientists have been concerned with content of culture (the first element of the definition) and overlooked boundaries, (the second and third elements of the definition).

- Organizations and/or groups within them are not characterized by geographic and historical isolation. In early studies of cultures by anthropologists, such isolation of groups had been the case; boundaries could be assumed. In studying cultures in and of organizations, boundaries cannot be assumed without significant costs (i.e., misguided and ineffective action).

- Appreciating the boundaries of cultures in work settings entails: identifying the experiential site or locus of culture, and assessing its penetration.

- The image of the cultural Geiger counter was used to convey the multiple aspects of the penetration of culture: pervasiveness, homogeneity and stability. Typical questions for probing each aspect were discussed.

- Orientation of one culture vis a vis another was discussed in terms of characterizing the direction and target of subcultures.

- Inquiry processes as sequences of steps to appreciating workplace cultures were outlined. Different sequences were linked to different aims.

Thus far, most researchers and practitioners have attended to the content of cultures in work settings, without attending to the issues of boundary. It is my hope that this presentation has made clear the costs of this oversight and what attending to

boundary issues entails.

FOOTNOTES

[1] This paper is part of a larger effort to delineate issues of culture that are fundamental to the cumulation of knowledge on culture. The overall effort has been supported by a grant from the Foundation Research Program at the Naval Postgraduate School and by the Chief of Naval Research, Psychological Sciences Division, Office of Naval Research, under contract # N00014-80-C-09-05:NR170-911. The especially helpful comments of several people on a first draft of the larger work ("Prerequisites for Fruitful Research on Organizational Culture") are reflected here. Stan Davis, Barbara Lawrence, Joanne Martin, Mike Tushman, and John Van Maanen each provided extensive substantive critiques. Paul Lawrence crystallized the reader's dilemmas in comprehending my message. The energy to continue this effort was spurred at critical points by the encouragement of Linda Pike and the enthusiasm of Dick Beckhard. My thanks to each of them.

[2] Notwithstanding the need among group members to experience their group and its culture as unique (Martin and Siehl, 1983), this component of the definition (i.e., the relationship between the content and the group) refers to sociological rather than

experiential uniqueness. The distinction is roughly equivalent to taking an etic rather than an emic perspective. Establishing sociological uniqueness involves locating the highest level or most encompassing boundary, such that the aspect of culture under consideration applies at any site or to any group within the boundary. This point will be taken up again in the discussion of the penetration of a culture.

3 Individual differences in the level of "cultural participation" (Louis, 1980) should not be overlooked as a contributor to variances in interpretations. The extent to which variance reflects heterogeneity as a characteristic of the culture, rather than lower levels of cultural participation on the part of individuals is a matter to tease out using traditional data analytic procedures.

4 The quest is not for the origins or source in the sense of where it started, historically. Rather the quest is for the current most encompassing sociological entity or institution, in the traditional "social fact" sense.

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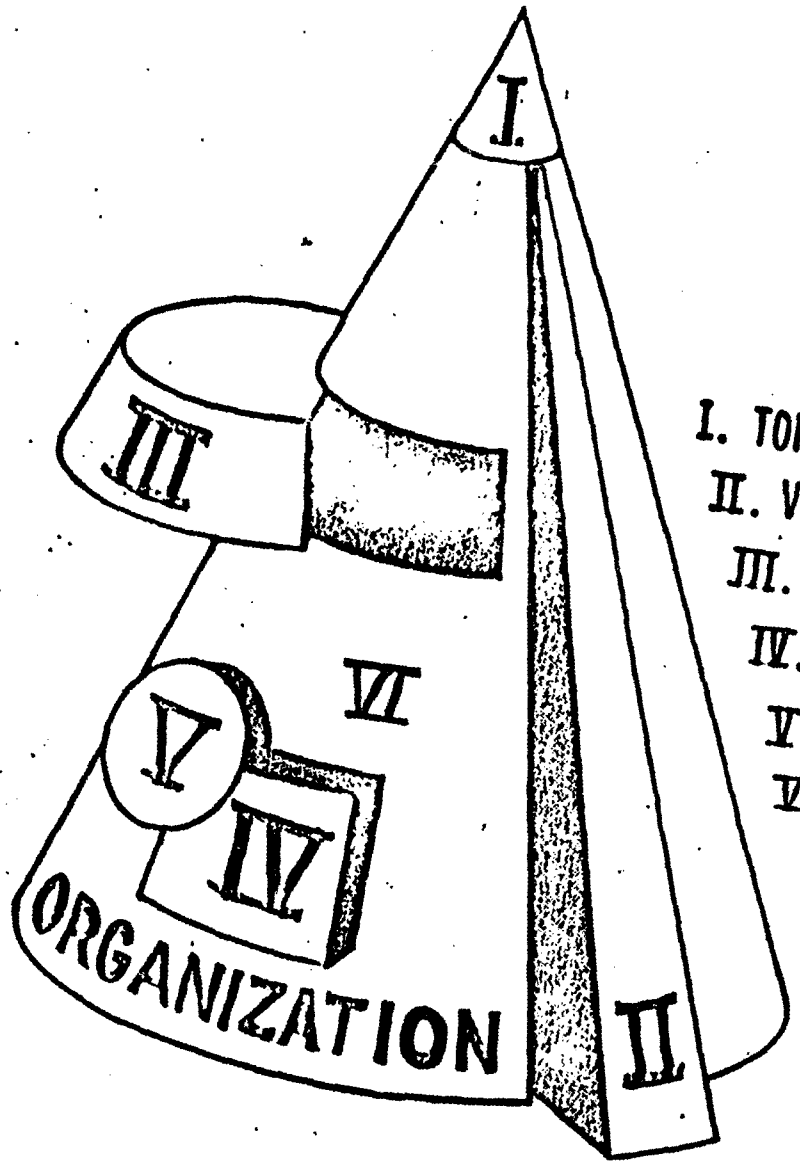

I. TOP: CORPORATE
II. VERTICAL SLICE: DIVISION
III. HORIZONTAL SLICE: JOB TYPE
IV. UNIT: DEPARTMENT
V. GROUP
VI. ORGANIZATION

FIGURE 1. INTRAORGANIZATIONAL CATEGORIES OF LOCUS OF CULTURE

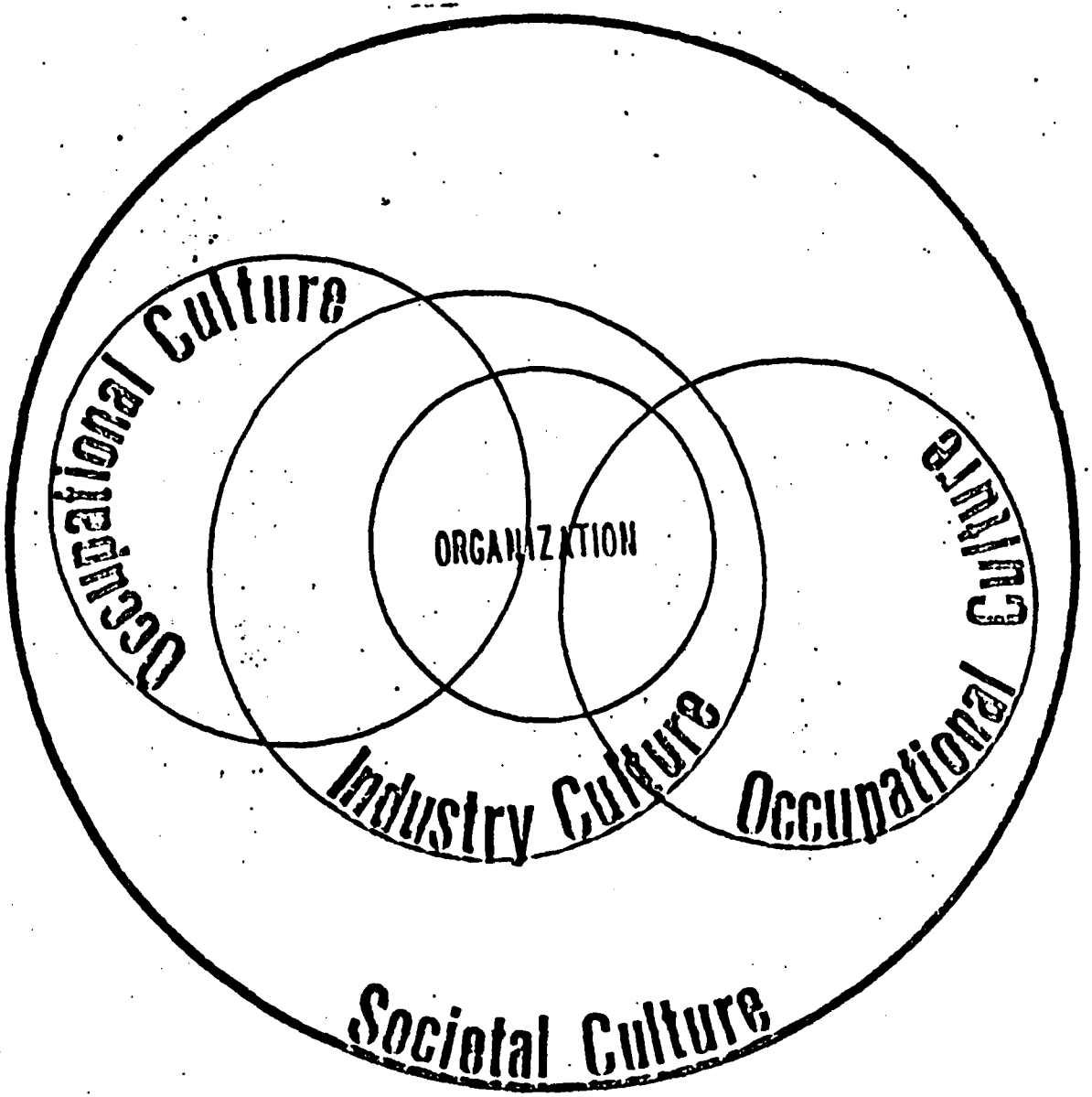

FIGURE 2. TRANSORGANIZATIONAL CATEGORIES OF LOCUS OF CULTURE

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