VARIABLES SHAPING THE CULTURE IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN MUNICIPALITIES

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Abstract

Background. Culture as the sole of each organization is examined itself or in different management concepts. Many studies identify culture as a main dimension in the organizational learning process or in learning organizations, both in the private and public sector. However there is a lack of research focusing on municipalities, especially in transformed countries. Ongoing changes in the task of imposed by the government as well as those resulting from the European grants cause needs for appropriate culture which is one learning organization dimensions in the light of theory.

Research aims. This paper explores which variables shaping organizational culture are important for the local municipalities in relation to their scope and to propose their consistent typology for the state of art in research in the example of a transformed country.

Methods. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 670 municipalities, with response rate of 26,7% of total population. The questionnaire was filled in by one official from each municipality, who takes one of the following position: mayor, deputy mayor or municipality secretary.

Key findings. The analysed research results clearly demonstrate that the level of culture in the rural municipalities is higher than in the urban–rural municipalities and urban municipalities. It could be observed, inter alia, that high-rang officials (head of division or mayor) tend to be afraid to talk about their mistakes and there is hardly any atmosphere for constructive remarks.

Keywords: Culture, Learning organization, Organizational learning, Local government, Municipality

INTRODUCTION

Culture can be interpreted in the several different ways in sociology, anthropology and ethnology, art terms, agriculture, breeds, microbiology (Collins English Dictionar). Using the catalog of the National Library in Poland, by the title, the search result show 224 records with word "kultura", 322 for "kultury", and 33 for "kultur". A total number of units for these three mentioned terms equals 515, so when compared with the number of volumes with doublets at the end of December 2014: 9 887 831, the share is rather moderate. The number of books with the title

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"culture" or the mentioned cases of this word in the library of Bialystok University of Technology shows a similar number: 510 but in relation to their volumes, it means that the percentage is slightly higher than in the National Library in Poland. The use of word "culture" based on the analysis of two libraries, means that it is very significant in humanities. However, while using NUGAT and other databases of the collection of book and paper about culture and learning organization published in Poland, fewer than 10 are found.

In term of sociology culture is the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action (Collins English Dictionary). We can talk about the culture at the nation level, as well as regional, ethnic, organization, family, group and individual (Kołodziej-Durnaś, 2005; Kostecka & Skowera, 2014; Kunstler, 2008; Sułkowski, 2012; Szarota, 2006; Winkler, 2008; Zbiegień-Maciag, 2008). Besides many authors use the term of culture for describing and analysis the various processes in particular political or sectoral system changes (Bratnicki, 2014; McDonald, 2012; Rifkin, 2003; Wojnar, 2006). In area of management the main input into theoretical background to culture was given by many international academics (Denison, 1990; Hofstede, 2004; Schein, 2005; Bjerke, 2004). However literature studies show interest in culture by Polish academics. This interest is specific as Poland start to change socio-economic system. Researchers use different methods of investigations about the organization culture, its aspects and strategies connected with building culture, from qualities method (Kostera, 2007; Kołodziej-Durnaś, 2012; Zbiegień-Maciąg, 2013) to quantities methods, which are more common among Polish researchers (Glińska-Neweś, 2007; Konecki & Chomczyński, 2007; Sitko-Lutek, 2004; Siemiński, 2008; Siemiński, Krukowski, & Szamrowski, 2014).

CULTURE AS A ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTIC OF LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The connection between culture and learning should be analysed as important input for organizational learning. We start from a cognitive perspective for culture and find that in that area there is a relation with learning, then with organizational learning concept. The main dilemmas of cognitive mainstream organizational culture management are organized in six areas (Sulkowski, 2012):

1. The multiplicity of paradigms, theories and definitions of organizational culture,
2. The diversity of models and typology of organizational culture,

3. Separation of organizational culture from other areas of the organization,
4. Priority or undervalued culture in relation to other areas of the organization (e.g. strategy, the structure),
5. The relationship between organizational culture and environment of the organization,
6. Weaknesses of research methodology and organizational culture development.

Learning as a main body in organizational learning concept was mainly developed in the psychological field (Wang & Pervaiz, 2002). The application of learning at the organizational level come into management practice in 1980 as a collective individual learning, training and development. The following theories: behavioral, cognitive, social cognitive and gestalt are widely recognized approaches to individual learning, purporting to a range of learning modes. Experiential learning focus on reinforce in stimulus-response (S-R) model (behaviorism). Cognitive approach, where model is based on environmental cues-expectancy and concentrate on metal act using rational learning. Stimulus – organism – response (S-O-R) model focus on symbolizing, forethought, vicarious, self-regulatory, self-reflective, where we distinguish three learning modes: observational learning, enactive learning, and also self-efficacy. Last theory: gestalt use model called "patterns of wholes", which focus on 'balance' of cognitive, physical, emotional, emotional and spiritual factors. There learning modes is characterized by experiential learning.

The identification of the culture dimension in private learning organizations is more recognized than in public organization. The theoretical model of learning organization invented by Kim was applied on a sociological aspect (Rokita, 2005). The concept of organizational learning is defined differently, but in the perspective of culture in the light of organizational learning theory we can use the following definition:

> A learning organization should be viewed as a metaphor rather than a distinct type of structure, whose employees learn conscious communal processes for continually generating, retaining and leveraging individual and collective learning to improve performance of the organizational system in ways important to all stakeholders and by monitoring and improving performance (Drew & Smith, 1995).

Previous international studies show the background and links between culture and organizational learning indicating that:
1. Culture, is as an independent and internal variable (Shrivastava, 1983),
2. Organisation's culture includes "coherent, order, and meaning" and enables the institutionalisation of an appropriate sense-

making structure to facilitate the interpretation of unfamiliar events (Weick, 1985),

3. Culture is a facilitator of organizational learning (Barette et al., 2012),

4. Organizational culture is related to personal mastery, share vison and system thinking (Mehrabi et al., 2012).

Statistical relation between organizational culture and dimensions of organizational learning was tested by Mehrabi et al., 2013). They used a standard organizational culture questionnaire with 36 questions and self-made questionnaire with 25 questions about learning organization based on Senge theory (Mehrabi et al., 2013). The analyses show a significant relation between organizational culture and realization degree of learning organization. In-depth statistical calculations indicate a significant relation between organizational culture and dimensions of personal mastery, shared vision and systems thinking. To highlight the culture as a dimension in learning organization we also used research result (Table 1), where the sum for the culture is the highest among other dimensions. It equals 10 among 12 different frameworks of learning organizations (Akhtar & Khan, 2011).

In transformed countries, the research about culture was continued in different sectors and concepts of management. The literature review indicates that in the private sector culture was examined for example in the light of knowledge management concept (Glińska-Neweś, 2007). Lastly, research conducted in the firm by Zgrzywa-Ziemak indicates that culture is the main dimension of organizational learning. Olejniczak in his research in Polish Ministries use SEM to make grouping variables, and it turned out that specific culture variables are disseminated into different independent combined variables (Olejniczak, 2010).

According to Canadian research, organizational learning culture could be measured by five variables: openness to change and innovation, sharing and mutual assistance (sharing information and ideas), acceptances that formal rules may be questioned as to their utility and value, encourages an experimental attitude and perceives any changes as an opportunity, not a threat (Barette et al., 2012).

Among many internal attributes, leaders have a more powerful tool to change the organizational culture but first of all, they should know what culture is. They could study the theory of culture or behave using the own knowledge, mainly the intuition without proper scientific background, which can be met mostly in many organizations. We conduct the research municipality leaders: mayors or vice mayors.

Table1. Frameworks of Organizational Learning/Learning Organizations and Comparison of Their Characteristics

	Garvin (2008)	Senge (2006)	Parek (2003)	Lei et al. (1999)	Goh (1998)	DiBella (1997)	Goh & Richards (1997)	Gephart & Marsik (1996)	Bennet & O'Brien (1994)	Garvin (1993)	McGill & Slocum (1993)	McGill et al. (1992)	Sum
Personal Mystery/ self-development		+	+					+	+			+	5
Mental Models/ Culture/Climate/ Environment		+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	10
Shared Vision/ Mission		+	+	+	+		+		+				6
Team learning		+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+			8
Systems Thinking		+	+			+		+	+	+		+	7
Leadership	+	+	+		+	+	+				+	+	8
Knowledge/Information Flow	+		+		+		+	+		+	+	+	8
Information/ scanning imperative	+						+	+	+	+			5
Experimentation/ Experimental Learning	+						+	+			+		4
Training	+							+	+				3
Management/ Executive Practices				+					+		+		3
Structure/ Network Intimacy			+	+					+		+		4
Rewards & Recognition				+					+		+	+	4
Performance Management						+			+				2
Learning form experience						+							1
Learning from others										+			1
Operational variety						+							1
Concern for measurement						+							1
Multiple Advocates						+							1
Work Processes									+				1

Source: based on Akhtar and Khan (2011, p. 269).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in 2014 among 670 Polish municipalities, with the response rate 26,7% of total population. The questionnaire survey was filled in by one official from each municipality, who takes

one of the following positions: mayor, deputy mayor or municipality secretary. The authors used electronic questionnaire based of software Joomla Surveys, which allows to send directly mails with a dedicated login and password. During the survey, it turned out that some technical problems occurred, in that case a questionnaires sent again to mail boxes in .doc or .pdf format. The characteristic of municipalities were as follows: 59,6% – rural, 23,7% – urban-rural, and 6,7% – urban. The balance of gender was very similar: women 52,8% and man 47,2%. Most responders were in his prime, 34,4% respondents were between 46 – 55 years old, then in ages more than 32,9% and third significant group was in ages between 36 – 45 with 26,0% of share. The questionnaire was mostly filled by the municipal secretaries – 68,9%, then by mayors 22,4% and lastly by deputy mayors – 8,7%. The numbers of terms show some turnover in the position of mayor, they served two terms in 28,1 municipalities, with similar results for the first term – 27,2%. In each of the sight municipalities which were investigated, the mayors has worked for fifth terms. People with many years of professional experience in public administration, i.e. over 20 years, account for a significant number of the respondents – 51%, then with experience between 11 – 20 – 29,9%, which shows some stability in the public sector. Three quarts of the respondents have higher education. The responders graduated mainly from law studies, including administration – 34%, then economic, including management – 22%, with the third significant share of 21,8% – engineering.

The questionnaire statements concerning the culture of dimension were based on in-depth interviews and conducted literatures studies on public administration (Olejniczak, 2010; Barette et al., 2012). The statements were rated by the respondents on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for the lowest level of agreement and 7 – the highest level of agreement with a given statement. The 7-stand scale is used in more advanced statistical analyse and better justified the reliability of conducted research (Bedyńska & Książek, 2012; Wierzbiński, 2009).

CULTURE DIMENSION IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN POLISH MUNICIPALITIES

Survey questionnaire consisted of 12 statements potentially related to organizational culture of municipal administration. In order to assure culture measurement and test the homogeneity and reliability of scale used in the study, exploratory factor analysis and test of scale reliability was carried out. The exploratory factor analysis showed that the scale is unidimensional. Reliability test was carried out with the usage of Cronbach's Alfa statistic (Table 2). The reliability of the scale is very

high (α =0,95) what allows for the usage of selected items of the survey for culture of municipal administration measurement.

**Table 2.** The Measurement Scale of Organizational Culture in Municipal Administration – Reliability Test

Statement* (n=670)	Average	SD	Cronbach's Alfa
We take care to ensure proper working atmosphere	5,95	1,34	
We believe that teamwork effectively contributes to the achievement of aims our municipality	5,98	1,33	
Employees are open to new ideas and concepts	5,36	1,42	
Employees help each other in learning new things	5,28	1,40	
Employees are encouraged to express their opinions	5,39	1,49	
When in municipality conflict occurs, we can deal with it effectively	5,56	1,40	0,95 (11 items)
Employees share their knowledge from training, meetings, of the law acts and their own experience	4,86	1,63	
Employees are not afraid to take challenges	4,92	1,53	
Employees are not afraid to admit to the error	4,57	1,57	
The atmosphere is open to constructive criticism and comments	4,69	1,59	
Employees know the plans for the future development of the municipality	5,26	1,52	
Employees write reports after completed training courses*	-	-	-

* the statement was excluded (α =0,92).

Source: own calculation based on conducted research.

The level of culture of in the elaborated scale can range from 1 to 7. The scale was used to the measurement of culture in municipalities in Poland (separately in rural, urban and urban-rural municipalities). The level of organizational culture in rural, urban and urban-rural municipalities is almost similar and range from 5,1 to 5,3 (Figure 1).
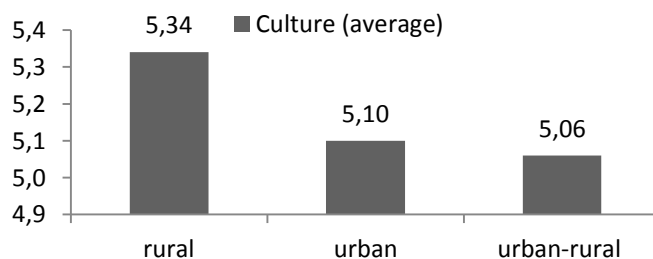
Figure 1. The Level of Organizational Culture in Rural, Urban and Urban-Rural Municipalities in Poland

Kruskal–Wallis Test: Chi-Square (5,94); df (2); Pr > Chi-Square (0,51).

Source: own calculation based on conducted research.

To compare the level of culture in the three groups nonparametric – the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used. It could be said that the level in of organizational culture in rural, urban and urban-rural municipalities in Poland do not differ statistically ($\chi^2 (2) = ni$).

In the next steps all statements were analysed singly. The average level and standard deviation for every item and all 670 observations was presented (Table 2). Then, all statements were analysed in groups of: separately for urban, urban-rural and rural municipalities. Again, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used. In four cases statistical differences in groups were demonstrated, namely "We take care to ensure proper working atmosphere", "Employees are open to new ideas and concepts", "Employees help each other in learning new things", "The atmosphere is open to constructive criticism and comments" (Table 3).

Table 3. The Measurement Scale of Organizational Culture in Culture in Rural, Urban and Urban-Rural Municipalities in Poland

Statement	rural (n=466)	urban (n=45)	urban-rural (n=159)	Kruskal–Wallis H test
We take care to ensure proper working atmosphere	6,0	5,8	5,7	($\chi 2=11,3$; df=2, p<0,01)
We believe that teamwork effectively contributes to the achievement of aims our municipality	6,0	5,9	5,9	
Employees are open to new ideas and concepts	5,5	5,2	5,0	($\chi 2=11,1$; df=2, p<0,01)
Employees help each other in learning new things	5,4	4,9	5,0	($\chi 2=14,7$; df=2, p<0,01)
Employees are encouraged to express their opinions	5,5	5,1	5,2	
When in municipality conflict occurs, we can deal with it effectively	5,6	5,5	5,4	
Employees share their knowledge from training, meetings, of the law acts and their own experience	4,9	4,8	4,8	
Employees are not afraid to take challenges	5,0	4,9	4,7	
Employees are not afraid to admit to the error	4,6	4,6	4,4	
The atmosphere is open to constructive criticism and comments	4,8	4,4	4,4	($\chi 2=7,7$; df=2, p<0,05)
Employees know the plans for the future development of the municipality	5,3	5,1	5,1	

Source: own calculation based on conducted research.

The different average of indicated statement in certain type of municipalities shows some features, where the number of inhabitants via the number of employees, and the number and scope of projects, range of problems, could cause more competitions in bigger municipalities. In our opinion, the variables like: "Employees help each other in learning new things", "The atmosphere is open to constructive criticism and comments", "Employees know the plans for the future development of the municipality", "Employees are encouraged to express their opinions" have a higher average in rural municipalities then in urban and urban-rural ones.

CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of organizational learning the analyzed aspect of culture in the municipalities, indicates that the developed tool and its scale is reliable. The results, however, concerned the prospects of culture observed by the most important or second most important person in the hierarchy of the municipality– it means the mayor or vicemayor/the secretary office. In subsequent studies, it would be worthwhile seeing how important the culture of the local government is for all of its employees. The research suggests that some of the most important people in the organization consciously or subconsciously confirm the dimension of organizational culture embodied with learning municipality. The respondents state that employees are afraid to talk about their mistakes and there is hardly any atmosphere for constructive remarks. This should be changed, if they really want to accelerate organizational learning within municipality. One of the differentiating factors in municipal offices in Poland is their size, which depends on the size of the community, which is most people work in the city government, then the urban-rural and rural at the end. The study shows that the level of culture in rural municipalities is higher in the urban-rural municipalities and urban municipalities. Another unconfirmed factor influencing the culture may be the proximity directly from the county town or city with county rights, but has not been analyzed in this study. The study fills a gap in research on organizational culture within municipal offices, observed by their leaders. Due to the high scale reliability (Cronbach Alpha), it can be carried out in other public organization or even extended to cover all employees of certain organization, not only the top executives. In a globalizing world, organizational culture should be a catalyst for change even in municipalities or in a broader context in public sector organizations in the light of experience of private organizations. The change of learning employees and organization shows a natural process in each human, which starts in

childhood and should never end. This arguments should help employees and of course organizations to think more seriously, also in the aspects of practice of implementation of organizational learning as dominant concept.

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CZYNNIKI KSZTAŁTUJĄCE KULTURĘ W ORGANIZACYJNYM UCZENIU SIĘ URZĘDÓW GMINNYCH

Abstrakt

Tło badań. Kultura jako istotny wewnętrzny wymiar każdej organizacji jest analizowana samodzielnie oraz jako element różnych koncepcji zarządzania. Kultura wskazywana jest jako główny czynnik wpływający na proces organizacyjnego uczenia się oraz podstawowy element organizacji uczącej się, zarówno w sektorze publicznym, jak i prywatnym. Przeprowadzone studia literaturowe wskazują jednak, że brakuje badań odnoszących się do kultury organizacyjnej w urzędach gminnych, zwłaszcza w krajach transformujących się. Bieżące zmiany w zadaniach nakładanych na gminy przez rząd, jak również z zadania związane z wydatkowaniem funduszy europejskich wpływają na konieczność kształtowania odpowiedniej kultury organizacyjnej jako jednego z istotnych wymiarów organizacji uczącej się.

Cele badań. Celem artykułu była identyfikacja czynników kształtujących kulturę organizacyjną w kontekście organizacyjnego uczenia się w urzędach gmin oraz ich analiza w zależności od rodzaju urzędu.

Metodyka. Badanie ankietowe zostało przeprowadzone wśród 670 urzędów gminnych w Polsce, co stanowiło 26,7 % ogółu badanej populacji. Ankieta wypełniana była przez jednego urzędnika z każdego urzędu, pełniącego funkcję burmistrza, wójta, ich zastępcę lub sekretarza gminy.

Kluczowe wnioski. Wyniki przeprowadzonych badań wyraźnie wskazują, że poziom kultury organizacyjnej w urzędach w gminach wiejskich jest wyższy niż w urzędach gminnych miejsko-wiejskich i miejskich. Zauważono między innymi, że zarządzający urzędami (burmistrz, wójt, ich zastępcy) obawiają się mówić o swoich błędach, a w urzędach brakuje atmosfery zachęcającej do konstruktywnej dyskusji.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura, organizacyjne uczenie się, organizacja ucząca się, samorząd lokalny, urząd gminy.