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A Theoretical Introduction to Organizational Tradition: An Analytical Framework Beyond Culture

Örgütsel Geleneğe Kuramsal Bir Giriş- Kültürün Ötesinde Bir Analitik Çerçeve

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the concept of organizational tradition within an independent analytical framework. While tradition has long been discussed in the social sciences through ritual, symbol, narrative, and memory, it has often been treated as synonymous with organizational culture in organizational studies, which has overshadowed its analytical potential. The study adopts a conceptual review method, systematically analyzing key literature on culture and tradition to develop a comparative framework. Within this framework, the article distinguishes between culture and tradition, highlighting the structural components of organizational tradition and its functional dimensions. Accordingly, organizational tradition is positioned not as a sub-element of culture but as a distinctive institutional structure that shapes normative orders and identity formation processes. Future research in this field can contribute to a better understanding of the analytical potential of organizational traditions as well as their practical implications.

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, örgütsel gelenek kavramını bağımsız bir analitik çerçevede ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Gelenek, sosyal bilimlerde ritüel, sembol, anlatı ve hafıza üzerinden tartışılan çok boyutlu bir olgu iken, örgütsel bağlamda çoğunlukla örgüt kültürüyle eşanlamı olarak kullanılmıştır ve bu nedenle analitik potansiyeli gölgede kalmıştır. Çalışma, kuramsal bir derleme yöntemi benimseyerek kültür ve geleneğe dair temel literatürü sistematik biçimde incelemekte ve kavramsal bir karşılaştırma çerçevesi geliştirmektedir. Bu çerçevede kültür ve gelenek arasındaki kavramsal ayrım ortaya konulmakta; örgütsel geleneğin yapısal bileşenleri ve işlevsel boyutları tartışılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, örgütsel gelenek yalnızca örgüt kültürünün bir alt unsuru değil, normatif düzenleri ve kimlik üretim süreçlerini şekillendiren özgün bir kurumsal yapı olarak konumlandırılmaktadır. Gelecekte bu alanda yapılacak çalışmalar, örgütsel geleneklerin analitik potansiyelinin daha iyi anlaşılmasına ve pratikte değerlendirilmesine katkı sağlayabilir.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a growing need and interest in understanding the social and cultural dimensions of organizations. Particularly from the 1980s onward, under the influence of globalization, the transformation of capitalism, and technological advances, organizations have increasingly been examined not merely as technical and rational structures but also as social and cultural systems. Within this context, the concept of organizational culture has gained a central position in understanding and interpreting organizational life, becoming a prominent focus in the management and organization literature (Smircich, 1983; Schein, 1985; Martin, 2002).

While organizational culture has established a central position within management and organization studies, the concept of tradition has not received comparable scholarly attention and has largely remained in the shadow of culture. Consequently, tradition has long been treated as an indirect component of organizational culture rather than as an independent analytical framework (Dacin, Dacin & Kent, 2019; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Dacin & Dacin, 2008). Conceptually, whereas culture generates a broad universe of meaning through values, norms, and symbolic systems (Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2002), tradition diverges within this universe through its focus on selective transmission, ritualized practices, and historical continuity (Shils, 1981; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Glassie, 1995).

Tradition has been widely discussed in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history as a multidimensional phenomenon that reinforces identity, belonging, and authority (Durkheim, 1912/2008; Weber, 1978; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Handler & Linnekin, 1984). In the organizational context, however, tradition emerges as a critical dimension that renders visible the normative order, symbolic structure, and historical continuity of organizations. In this regard, tradition is not a passive subcomponent of culture but a dynamic construct that plays a distinctive role in the construction of identity, the production of belonging, and the attainment of legitimacy through selective transmission, ritualized practices, and symbolic memory (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Hibbert & Huxham, 2010; Lockwood & Glynn, 2017; Truong, 2019).

This article is designed not as a systematic literature review but as a conceptual synthesis. Its primary aim is to analyze theoretical approaches to organizational tradition in a holistic manner and to contribute to the repositioning of the concept as an independent analytical framework. In Turkish scholarship, the notion of organizational tradition has not been directly addressed; existing studies have tended to examine it indirectly through the lenses of organizational culture, ritual, or symbolism. This has obscured the concept's potential within institutional analysis. Accordingly, the present paper seeks to fill this theoretical gap by articulating a distinct conceptual foundation for organizational tradition.

In conclusion, this article disentangles the concept of organizational tradition from approaches that conflate it with culture, positioning it as an independent analytical category within management and organization studies. The unique contribution of this manuscript lies in offering a conceptual framework that clarifies the structural components and functional dynamics of organizational tradition. The paper first delineates the conceptual distinctions between tradition and culture, then examines the place of organizational tradition in the literature, and finally evaluates its core components and functions. In doing so, it demonstrates that organizational tradition—through its multidimensional structure and distinctive functions—can be analytically distinguished from organizational culture, providing a valuable lens for understanding the normative orders, symbolic structures, and historical continuity of organizations.

2. TRADITION AND CULTURE

The term tradition derives from the Latin root *traditio*, meaning “to hand over” or “to transmit.” This etymological origin underscores the constitutive role of tradition in sustaining continuity between the past and the present. However, tradition is not merely a historical transmission or remnant; it also functions as a mechanism for maintaining social order, constructing identity, and producing normative bonds (Shils, 1981; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

The conceptualization of tradition has evolved through the contributions of multiple disciplines, with anthropology and sociology playing particularly significant roles in this development. In anthropology, tradition has been discussed at times as a normative structure that ensures social stability and at other times as a key source of identity and meaning-making (Malinowski, 1922; Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 1996). Within the sociological literature, tradition has been regarded as a phenomenon that reinforces collective consciousness through rituals, supports the legitimacy of authority, and persists through its reconfiguration in processes of modernization (Durkheim, 1912/2008; Weber, 1978; Giddens, 1991).

Although the concept of tradition has often been used synonymously with culture in the literature, there are significant distinctions between the two. Culture refers to a broad universe of meaning that guides the entirety of social life through values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior (Geertz, 1973; Schein, 1985; Alvesson, 2002). Tradition, by contrast, consists of practices that preserve historical continuity, possess normative binding force, and are selectively transmitted within this universe (Shoham, 2011; McDonald, 1997). In other words, while culture provides a comprehensive and encompassing framework, tradition serves as the carrier of ritualized and symbolic structures that ensure continuity and attachment within that framework (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Prickett, 2009).

At this point, the distinctions between culture and tradition can be articulated more concretely across the dimensions of scope, temporal orientation, continuity, structure, and function. In terms of scope, culture represents a broad and flexible universe of meanings encompassing a society's values, norms, and symbolic systems (Geertz, 1973; Schein, 1985; Alvesson, 2002), whereas tradition involves selectively transmitted practices endowed with historical continuity (Shoham, 2011; McDonald, 1997). Regarding temporal orientation, culture tends to emphasize the contemporary context, while tradition establishes a normative linkage with the past, reconstructing the present through historical narratives (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). Structurally, culture forms a flexible and diverse system, whereas tradition represents a ritualized and normatively reinforcing order that sustains authority (Shils, 1981; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Finally, while culture functions to produce meaning and coherence, tradition contributes to the construction of belonging, legitimacy, and identity (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015). These distinctions are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 summarizes the key conceptual distinctions between culture and tradition across the dimensions of scope, temporal orientation, continuity, structure, and function. This comparison is grounded in foundational works by Geertz (1973), Shils (1981), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Giddens (1991), Martin (2002), Trice and Beyer (1993), and Dacin and Dacin (2008). Within the literature, these dimensions highlight the principal analytical axes through which tradition diverges from culture.

In conclusion, tradition is a normative mechanism grounded in selective transmission and historical continuity, whereas culture represents a broader, more flexible, and multilayered universe of meaning. Therefore, viewing tradition merely as a subdimension of culture obscures its distinctive functions in producing legitimacy, fostering be-

longing, and constructing organizational identity. In management and organization studies, the concept of tradition has likewise been predominantly examined through the lens of culture, a tendency that has hindered its development as an independent analytical category and limited its visibility within the literature (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Dacin, Dacin & Kent, 2019; Truong, 2019).

3. THE CONCEPT OF ORGANIZATIONAL TRADITION

In the management and organization literature, the concept of tradition has long remained unaddressed directly and has typically been evaluated within the shadow of organizational culture studies. This tendency has prevented the concept from attaining an independent analytical framework and has consequently limited its visibility in scholarly discourse (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Martin, 2002; Dacin & Dacin, 2008). Yet, tradition is not a passive subelement of culture but a dynamic structure that independently generates belonging, continuity, and legitimacy (Shils, 1981; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Shoham, 2011).

In the organizational context, traditions are dynamic phenomena that contribute to the formation of culture, yet extend beyond being a passive component of it by possessing their own distinctive analytical structure and function (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Truong, 2019). While organizational culture is generally defined as a system of shared values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns among members (Schein, 1985; Alvesson, 2002), organizational tradition refers within this broader framework to ritualized practices, symbolically meaningful repetitions, and the construction of historical memory. Whereas culture offers a holistic universe of meaning, tradition stands out through practices that create selective and normative forms of attachment within that universe (Weber & Dacin, 2011; Dacin, Dacin & Kent, 2019).

Table 1. Conceptual distinctions between culture and tradition

Dimension	Culture	Tradition
Scope	Encompasses values, norms, beliefs, behavioral patterns, and symbolic systems that shape the totality of social life (Geertz, 1973).	Consists of selectively transmitted practices that acquire historical continuity (Shils, 1981).
Temporal orientation/historical reference	Primarily oriented toward the present; reference to the past is not obligatory (Giddens, 1991).	Explicitly refers to the past; links the present to historical narratives in a normative way (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983)
Continuity	Implicit, flexible, and adaptively reproduced according to context (Martin, 2002).	Ritualized, selective, and normatively reproduced to sustain historical continuity (Shils, 1981).
Structure	Flexible system open to change and diversity (Trice & Beyer, 1993).	A normative order that reinforces authority and provides institutional continuity (Dacin & Dacin, 2008).
Function	Generates meaning, coherence, and cultural identity (Martin, 2002).	Ensures continuity, fosters belonging, and legitimizes identity and authority (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010).

The position of organizational tradition within the literature remains contested. Some studies conceptualize it as a subdimension of culture (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Zucker, 1977). In contrast, other works argue that traditions constitute an independent source of institutional continuity and legitimacy production (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Weber & Dacin, 2011; Suddaby, Foster & Trank, 2010). Moreover, Feldman's (2006) notion of "moral memory" draws attention to the ethical dimension of tradition, offering a distinctive contribution to this body of research.

Studies on the dynamic nature of organizational traditions demonstrate that these structures are neither static nor immutable; rather, they are continually reinterpreted in relation to their contextual settings. For example, the Step Sing tradition examined by Morris (2018) has persisted despite undergoing formal changes, maintaining both its meaning and its function. Similarly, Lockwood and Glynn (2017) emphasize that traditions are not merely repetitive practices but phenomena sustained through the emotional ownership of individuals. This perspective shows that organizational tradition contributes to the production of belonging and meaning not only at the institutional but also at the individual level. In this regard, Truong's (2019) doctoral dissertation stands out as one of the most comprehensive studies systematically addressing the concept. Truong defines organizational tradition as a structure that generates collective belonging through rituals, symbols, and narratives within a consciously maintained continuity between an organization and its historical past, and through the scale he developed, makes visible the measurability of these dynamic and multidimensional structures and functions.

In addition, the multiple case study conducted by Mathias, Solomon, and Hutto (2024) demonstrates that tradition serves not merely to preserve the past but also to foster trust and legitimacy within interorganizational competition relationships that accompany innovation. This finding reveals that organizational tradition is not a static remnant of the past but a dynamic resource possessing strategic value.

In conclusion, the concept of organizational tradition can be regarded neither as a subordinate element subsumed within culture nor as a structure entirely detached from it. Rather, it exists as a distinctive institutional construct that shapes organizational identity, belonging, and legitimacy through historical continuity, normative binding, and the production of symbolic meaning (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Dacin, Dacin & Kent, 2019; Truong, 2019). In this respect, organizational tradition is not merely a reproduction of the past but also functions as an institutional resource that enables organizations to strategically manage their continuity, identity, and legitimacy (Weber & Dacin, 2011; Mathias, Solomon & Hutto, 2024). Therefore, beyond organizational culture, tradition represents a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that shapes both normative order and strategic orientation, carrying strong analytical potential within the management and organization literature.

4. THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL TRADITION

Organizational traditions are multidimensional structures that nurture an institution's historical identity, foster a sense of belonging among its members, and sustain organizational continuity. The literature most frequently highlights rituals, symbols, narratives, and institutional memory as the core elements of organizational tradition. These elements do not merely represent a legacy transmitted from the past to the present; they also generate the normative order of organizations and construct the framework of legitimacy that shapes their future (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Truong, 2019).

Although rituals, symbols, narratives, and institutional memory are analytically separable, they operate in practice as a dynamically intertwined system (Geertz, 1973; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Dacin, Dacin & Kent, 2019). Rituals draw meaning from symbolic forms, narratives embed these.

Rituals within organizational history, and institutional memory provides the temporal continuity that sustains both (Olick & Robbins, 1998). This dynamic interplay allows traditions to reproduce belonging and legitimacy not as isolated elements, but as mutually reinforcing processes that shape organizational continuity and identity (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010).

Rituals are performative practices that are repeated at regular intervals and enacted through collective participation. Such activities create spaces in which members experience organizational values and perform collective identity (Alexander, 2016). Especially in times of crisis or uncertainty, rituals strengthen the connection with the past, thereby providing continuity and legitimacy (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010). Closely intertwined with rituals, symbols also embody organizational values; through logos, spatial arrangements, or titles, they visually reflect organizational identity and keep institutional memory alive (Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015).

Organizational narratives constitute another dimension through which institutions convey their history and values in a storied form. These narratives are not static; they are continuously reinterpreted according to context, adding new layers of meaning to the existing identity and reinforcing members' sense of belonging. Alongside narratives, institutional memory is also a fundamental component of tradition. Memory is sustained not only through written records but also through the attitudes of key leaders and symbolic practices. Feldman's (2006) notion of "moral memory" emphasizes that the past is not merely recalled but that ethical values and normative responsibilities are transmitted across generations.

The interplay of these components makes the functions of organizational traditions visible. First, recurring symbolic practices secure institutional continuity (Dacin & Dacin, 2008). In addition, traditions nurture a sense of belonging among members. Lockwood and Glynn's (2017) concept of "mattering" reveals the crucial role of traditional practices

in enabling individuals to feel valued within organizational life. Furthermore, traditions contribute to the preservation of the normative order by reproducing ethical values (Feldman, 2006). Strengthening the legitimacy of organizational decisions constitutes another key function; in times of uncertainty, traditional practices facilitate the acceptance of such decisions (Hibbert & Huxham, 2010; Suddaby, Foster & Trank, 2010).

Table 2 summarizes the core components of organizational tradition—rituals, symbols, narratives, and institutional memory—and their respective functions. This classification is based on the works of Trice and Beyer (1993), Alexander (2016), Dacin, Munir and Tracey (2010), Giorgi, Lockwood and Glynn (2015), Schultz and Hernes (2010), and Feldman (2006). In the literature, these four components are the most commonly identified building blocks of organizational tradition. Beyond these core elements, alternative frameworks have also been developed. For instance, Truong (2019) proposes a measurable structure of organizational tradition by categorizing it along the dimensions of objects, people, milestones, and values/practices. Similarly, Hibbert and Huxham (2010) conceptualize tradition through the dimensions of content, process, and authority, demonstrating its dynamic role in symbolic transmission and the construction of normative order.

In conclusion, organizational traditions are not passive reflections of the past; rather, through rituals, symbols, narratives, and institutional memory, they constitute multidimensional structures that shape organizational continuity, identity, and normative order. The interplay of these components enables traditions to perform critical functions such as fostering belonging, constructing identity, transmitting ethical values, and providing legitimacy in times of uncertainty. Typologies and conceptual frameworks developed in the literature further highlight this multidimensionality by presenting it within more structured and analytically coherent models (Truong, 2019; Hibbert & Huxham, 2010). In this regard, organizational traditions are not subordinate elements overshadowed by organizational culture but stand

out as independent concepts with distinctive structures and functions. This distinctiveness renders organizational traditions a high-potential analytical framework in management and organization studies, contributing to a deeper understanding of fundamental processes such as continuity, identity, and legitimacy (Dacin, Dacin & Kent, 2019; Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015; Lockwood & Glynn, 2017; Mathias, Solomon & Hutto, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

This article has examined organizational tradition conceptually and evaluated it within a theoretical framework independent from organizational culture. As highlighted in the literature, organizational traditions are not merely passive reproductions of the past but multidimensional structures that generate identity, belonging, legitimacy, and ethical responsibility. Through rituals, symbols, narratives, and institutional memory, traditions perform these functions and occupy a central position in organizational life. Therefore, tradition should be regarded as a distinctive analytical category that differs from culture while simultaneously interacting with it.

Indeed, this article challenges the conflation of organizational tradition with organizational culture and demonstrates that the concept provides an independent analytical framework for understanding institutional continuity, identity formation, and legitimacy production. It brings to light the theoretical significance of a concept that has long remained invisible in the management and organization literature. Through a theoretical synthesis, the distinction between culture and tradition is systematically articulated, and fragmented debates in the literature are integrated into a coherent perspective. Moreover, by referring to Truong's (2019) scale development study, the paper highlights that organizational tradition possesses not only conceptual but also measurable dimensions, offering a methodological opportunity for future empirical research.

Table 2. Components and functions of organizational tradition

Component	Description	Function
Rituals	Symbolic performances repeated at specific intervals and enacted through collective participation (e.g., ceremonies, commemoration). (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Alexander, 2016)	Ensure institutional continuity; provide legitimacy during times of crisis or uncertainty (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010).
Symbols	Visual representations that embody organizational values (e.g., logos, spatial arrangements, titles, uniforms) (Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015).	Construct organizational identity; make institutional memory visible; link the past with the present (Schultz & Hernes, 2010).
Narratives	Stories that transmit the organization's history and values across generations and are reinterpreted in changing contexts (Feldman, 2006).	Build collective memory; reproduce identity; strengthen a sense of belonging (Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015).
Institutional memory	The collective past sustained through written records, archives, leader behaviors, and symbolic practices (Schultz & Hernes, 2010).	Transmit ethical values; maintain the normative order; produce "moral memory" (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010).

It is evident that organizational traditions, through rituals, symbols, and narratives, generate a sense of belonging and identity among members, while providing legitimacy during times of crisis and uncertainty. This indicates that organizations can manage traditions not merely as cultural remnants but as strategic resources that strengthen normative order and institutional continuity. Future research should examine organizational tradition across different sectors and contexts using ethnographic methods, empirically test the interaction between culture and tradition, and expand scale development efforts to deepen the concept's measurability. Furthermore, studies exploring how traditions are transformed within processes of digitalization, globalization, and institutional change could offer new insights to the literature.

This conceptual distinction offers important implications for management practice. Traditions draw on their ritual, symbolic, narrative, and mnemonic components to generate organizational resources such as trust, belonging, and legitimacy, particularly in periods of change and uncertainty (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Hibbert & Huxham, 2010). For this reason, managers may deliberately mobilize traditions to mitigate resistance during transformation processes, strengthen organizational identity, and increase acceptance of decisions. Reframing rituals, updating symbolic elements, or aligning organizational narratives with new strategic directions can preserve a sense of continuity while supporting change initiatives. Recent research also demonstrates that traditions function not merely as cultural residues but as strategic capacities that generate coordination and predictability in complex organizational interactions (Mathias, Solomon & Hutto, 2024). In this context, organizational tradition may be viewed not as a passive cultural legacy but as a strategic institutional resource that managers can employ to reinforce identity, sustain legitimacy, and navigate organizational change effectively.

In conclusion, organizational traditions constitute indispensable dynamics of organizational life through their functions of ensuring institutional continuity, strengthening members' sense of belonging, transmitting ethical values, and producing legitimacy. This study positions organizational tradition as an independent analytical category and proposes it as a concept capable of opening new research avenues in the management and organization literature.

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