

WORKING P A P E R

Defining Corporate Culture

How Social Scientists Define Culture, Values and Tradeoffs among Them

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SUMMARY

Corporate culture is a term that recurs frequently in both the literature and rhetoric dealing with management, governance, and regulation. The wide usage of the term assumes that it is well-defined and understood by all, yet this is not the case. This literature review was conducted in an effort to develop a clear and concise definition of the frequently used and sometimes obscure concept of "culture" in various social science literatures. The review documents a wide range of theories across social science disciplines about what constitutes culture and how it can be studied. As the study of culture in organizations has flourished over the past forty years, these general theories have been adopted and transformed to describe corporate culture. With so many general theories of culture and a lack of consensus among organizational researchers on the appropriate theoretical viewpoint to adopt, corporate culture researchers have been left to pick and choose whatever definitions of culture and values fit their purpose, whether or not the definitions are comprehensive or contradictory or well-defined. Rather than choosing a single definition of culture that is appropriate for all corporate culture research, it is likely that different definitions and theories about the study of culture are appropriate for different purposes. However, it is crucial that corporate culture researchers understand the importance of the relationship between how corporate culture is defined and the appropriate framework and methods for studying and/or measuring this culture.