# Social psychology

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## Problem of countercultures in the modern organizations

*In the article the problematic of «an organizational counterculture» phenomenon which includes questions of defining of the given phenomenon, its role in modern organizations, coexistence of counterculture and general culture has been analysed. In the article the factors influencing on countercultures' occurrence in the organization have been distinguished. These are such factors as a condition of the organization, a style of management, an initiative of leadership, a degree of loyalty and adherence to the organization, a personal factor and an amalgamation of organizations.*

***Key words:*** *an organizational culture, an organizational counterculture, coexistence of a counterculture and the general culture, factors of countercultures' occurrence, a cultural coordination.*

Since 80-s of XX century well-known theorists of management and organizational psychologists E. Shane, L. Smirchich, G. Hovshtede, etc. have begun to give a special attention to the organizational culture which became «a revolutionary break-through in the theory of organizations». It is connected with that fact that the given phenomenon is a powerful tool of influence on personnel's behaviour and plays an important role in increasing efficiency of the organization. Today in foreign psychology there are developed theories, concepts and approaches to the study of organizational culture [1, 6, 10, 15]. In Russia interest to the given theme was generated in 90-s as a result of a change of a social and economic situation in the country and occurrence of a plenty of small and average business enterprises which were interested in an effective working in the market. That is why the questions of formation, maintenance and change of organizational culture are becoming urgent for Russia. Recently in Russian psychology single interesting theoretical, empirical and applied researches of this theme (Aksenovskaya L.N., Lipatov A.S., Zankovsky A.N., Vakhin A.A., etc.) have appeared [1, 2, 6, 4].

But, despite of sufficient study of the themes, in our opinion, there are some simplified notions about organizational culture, one of which is its understanding as monolithic phenomenon. And, though many psychologists admit poly-culture of the enterprises and firms, they traditionally focus their

attention on a dominating culture more. In reality any organization consists of various closed and open, isolated and cooperating, sometimes conflicting subcultures among which a counterculture has a special place. Up to now this phenomenon has not got enough attention both in Russian and in foreign psychology, though, in our opinion, it plays an important role not only in efficiency, but also in stable existence of the very organization. The knowledge of countercultures' features, their functions and factors influencing on their occurrence, enables the heads to use countercultures for the welfare of the organization.

In organizational psychology there are too few researches of countercultures what can be explained with insufficiency of theoretical and empirical researches of organizational subcultures, difficulties in their organization, inelaboration of methodical toolkit and complexity of the object of research. Some scientists consider that countercultures in a society and, in particular in an organization, can be found not so frequently and exist not so long time. Studies of industrial conflicts which can generate the given phenomenon have shown that in actual fact opposition of workers is not so great, as it was expected, and arising countercultures do not exist long and involve a small amount of supporters. Researches of youth movement in 70-s have revealed that only 15% of movement followers belonged to a counterculture [13]. Probably, this circumstance also prevents from active study of the given phenomenon in field conditions. But, in spite of the fact that countercultures do not exist long, they can exert a destructive influence on the organization what once again emphasizes the necessity of studying of this phenomenon.

Existing researches most often only establish the fact of countercultures presence in an organization and are based on the analysis of literature and concrete cases [12, 13, 14, 15]. Sometimes their role in development of an organization, change of organizational culture and introduction of some elements of the innovative plan is analyzed. Unfortunately, practically there are no data about influence's mechanisms of organizational countercultures on organizational development, about their essence and personal features of their members.

The analysis of works of foreign and Russian psychologists allows us to single out the following problems:

1. The problem of countercultures' definition in organizational psychology.

2. The role of countercultures in the development of an organization.

3. The factors influencing on occurrences of countercultures in an organization.

4. Coexistence of the general organizational culture and a counterculture.

The term "a counterculture" has come to organizational psychology from modern culturology and sociology where it is used for a designation of socio-cultural attitudes resisting to fundamental principles prevailing in a concrete culture.

The term "a counterculture" appeared in the western literature in 60-s and belongs to sociologist T. Rozzak, who has tried to unite the various spiritual trends directed against the prevailing culture into a relatively integral phenomenon – a counterculture [3]. Originally the term sounded as contraculture in order to avoid associations with the term counterrevolution, but in language it has been fixed as a counterculture. In modern culturology and sociology there is a different understanding of essence of countercultures. At first the counterculture was considered as a negative phenomenon destroying a society and having a parasitic character. In JU.N. Davidov's opinion [3] counterculture does not only destroy a society, but also destroys itself. In his works JU.N. Davidov defines the type of a countercultural person as a person who did not manage to adapt in a society, to occupy a significant for himself social role and take revenge for it upon the society. Some researchers, for example G. Yinger, consider that the counterculture corresponds with the culture concept and is in dependence on it, though it is negative [3]. According to his point of view it is not a negative attitude to the culture in general, but sharply contradicts it. The counterculture is a complex, a set and a configuration of norms and values of a group sharply contradicting the norms and the values of the culture prevailing in a society which part this group is [3]. At a behavioural level the counterculture appears as such a configuration of beliefs and values which induces a group of people sharing it to behave in a non-conformist way, making the latter inclined to falling out of a society. Yinger distinguishes two variants of countercultures: the open confrontation with the law and evasion of its requirements, i.e. either a struggle for recognition by a society for the right to live under one's own laws, or to live at the expense of a society, not taking any responsibilities. In last variant the counterculture has a parasitic character [3]. The other point of view considers a counterculture as a way of self-preservation and self-affirmation.

It is considered that in its functioning there are two interconnected motives: a conflict with the dominating culture and motive of self-preservation, i.e. a countercultural orientation does not exist by itself, but is provoked by a society denying the right to autonomy. The counterculture challenges hegemony of public ideology, and rejects that prevents the further development; that becomes an obstacle in a society's development [8]. According to the third point of view the counterculture performs an innovative function. In J.M. Lotman's opinion, culture as a complex whole is formed from layers of different speed development, therefore at the same time its elements can be at different stages of development. In culture simultaneously there are explosive and gradual processes which carry out the important functions: ones provide innovation, the others provide continuity. In this case the counterculture acts as a mechanism of cultural innovations and possesses a huge potential of updating [7].

Because of differences in understanding of a counterculture phenomenon the interpretation of the given term is ambiguous. In G. Yinger's opinion [3], on the one hand it is d imposed by a aspiration to present the given phenomenon wider whenever possible and to emphasize its relationship with all close phenomena of modern culture, and on the other hand it is directed on dissociation of countercultures from other phenomena of culture, on emphasizing the precipice running between it and traditional culture. Thus, the counterculture can be understood as:

- the culture of a conflict, of a break with values of dominating culture, their denying and a confrontation to them.
- a set of norms and values of social groups which are taking place in the conflict with the prevailing society [3, 9].

The interpretation of the term offered by JU.N. Davidov a little differs from these definitions. He considers a counterculture as an outlook, consciousness and attitudes denying the very principle of culture, i.e. being a new anticultural variant [7].

Thus, all definitions listed above are united by the understanding of a counterculture as a set of attitudes, norms and values contradicting to the dominating culture. However, G. Yinger concentrates the attention on a conflict (dynamic) basis, meaning an impact to the development of the general culture, but JU.N. Davidov more likely considers a counterculture from the point of view of a destroyer of the general culture.

In organizational psychologies the counterculture is most often considered not as a separate phenomenon, and as a special kind of subculture

which persistently enough rejects what the organization as a whole wants to achieve. For example, J. Martin gives the following definition: «These are the main values and notions as a direct challenge to the main values and notions of dominating culture» [15]. The main criterion of countercultures' classification, as a rule, is the attitude to the dominating culture. According to the given criterion the following kinds are distinguished:

1. the direct opposition to the values of the dominating organizational culture.

2. the opposition in authority's structure within the framework of the dominating culture.

3. the opposition to samples of attitudes and interactions, supported by the organizational culture [4].

The analysis of the existing researches of countercultures allows us to offer one more criterion of classification – according to functionality. In accordance with this criterion the counterculture can be:

1. Innovative
2. Reformative
3. Parasitizing
4. Destructive
5. Insulating

Thus, the understanding of a counterculture in organizational psychology differs from the understanding of this phenomenon in culturology and sociology a little. Firstly, the counterculture is not considered only in negative aspect, in organizational psychology the counterculture has also positive functions, such as innovative and reformative ones. Secondly, the leaders of the organization sometimes specially allow the existence of a counterculture for the purpose of organizational change. If originally the question about a counterculture was considered as about a challenge to the «system» with which it was breaking off, then nowadays the question about how the counterculture is being entered into this «system» is the most urgent. On the basis of the above-stated we offer the following definition of an organizational counterculture:

**The counterculture** is a special kind of subculture which represents a set of norms, values and notion s contradicting to values, notions and norms of the dominating organizational culture, and taking place either in a conflict with it, or promoting the organizational development. Thus, we concentrate the attention on that fact that a counterculture in an organization leads to changes in it in any case. However it is necessary to note that the given

problem still demands a special studying and an additional analysis, because the existing researches are not obviously enough for the substantiation of any theoretical inferences.

The question about countercultures' role in development of an organization is more supported by a practical material, though, it is basically the analysis of concrete cases. The study of a history of well-known organizations, such as "General Motors" and British company "Railways" has shown that countercultures can really play a positive part in the organization at different stages of its development [12, 13, 15]. That fact that leadership of an organization, analyzing a situation of the company's development, plans, supervises the process of formation and functioning of countercultures is especially marked. In one cases, this is an invitation of a new managerial team, which gradually introduces a new culture, which is necessary for successful work in the market, as it was in case of British company "Railways". In other cases, this is a support of a new promising project as in "General Motors". But in any case in order that countercultures operate as innovations and reformations, the understanding of the very phenomenon from the part of the leadership and skills to manage it are necessary, since an unguided process of formation of countercultures can lead to problems inside the organization. That is why we believe that the study of countercultures will help leaders to use more effectively countercultural tendencies in the organization for its perfection.

The question about factors influencing on occurrence of countercultures in the organizations causes a special interest. The analysis of existing sources allows us to single out six such factors:

## 1.    State of an organization

As the data of various researches of organizational culture have shown that state, which an organization is in, can provoke a regeneration of subcultures into countercultures. The following states are distinguished:

### *Crisis*

The crisis state of an organization or periods of instability can lead to occurrence of countercultures. According to S. Svidler's opinion [11] organizational culture exists in two types of situations; they are stable and unstable. The stable period is characterized by that fact that groups preserve the status quo in an existing social reality. The period of instability connected with threat to subcultures' existence, makes them be more active and

challenge to the dominating culture. Therefore, an extent, with which countercultures declare themselves, is frequently connected with an extent of stability of the organization. While a situation is stable, the influence of countercultures can be imperceptible or be shown inactively. For example, in G. Blur and P. Dawson's research, which has been carried out in the Australian medical center, countercultures as such have not been found out; however, otherwise-minded and dismissed subcultures, which can be entirely converted into countercultures in situations of instability, have been found out [11]. A similar example, we can see in Jones Food Company, when the managerial counterculture provoked by the owner himself exerted negative influence on a condition of the organization, having opposed its understanding of the culture to proclaimed values [10].

### Stage of development of an organization

In E. Shane's opinion, in mature and growing old organizations, where conservative views and bureaucratic tendencies are very powerful, there is also a risk of occurrence of countercultures [10]. The presence in an organization of outdated, conservative norms, which are falling behind development of outward things, causes a rejection in employees. Alternative sets of norms and values, more acceptable for successful functioning of departments and separate employees, start to develop and become stronger. In J. Martin's opinion, such countercultures will exist as long as the strong dominating culture will allow it to exist [15].

### Closeness of an organization

The organizational culture itself can promote an occurrence of countercultures if it does not tolerate an open expression of criticism and tends to conceal business conflicts [10].

### 2.    Style of leadership

Actions of leading superiors, provoking employees' derision, lessening the proclaimed values and standards, and presenting unnecessary problems in employees' work, run into opposition from the personnel. All of these lead to creation of histories and legends undermining the dominating culture, and to occurrence of countercultures [15].

### 3.    Initiative of leadership

Centralized organizations at a certain stage of their development can allow some departments a digression from norms and promote development of

nonconformist tendencies with the purpose of encouragement of innovative ideas or differentiation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the organization [15].

### 4. Extent of loyalty and adherence to the organization

Occurrence of countercultures can be also connected with an extent of loyalty and adherence to the organization. The high level of loyalty means a transition to adherence to the organization, at which a person identifies himself with it, considers himself and the organization as a single whole, and equates himself with its culture.

V.D. Kozlov [5] distinguishes four levels of adherence to the organization:

- the conservative level supporting the dominating culture;
- the reformist level having a set of alternative values and norms;
- the competitive level having a set of opposite values and norms;
- the indifferent level showing indifference to the norms and values of the organization.

Accordingly, organizational subcultures supporting adherence to the organization to a lesser degree (in the given classification they are competitive and indifferent ones) can show countercultural tendencies [5].

Probably, the degree of cultural inconsistency also influences on occurrence of countercultures. It can underlie a certain social tension of cooperation between subcultures and occurrence of aggressive subcultures. Unfortunately, empirical researches confirming this point of view are not obviously enough.

### 5. Personal factor

Personal features, values, purposes of separate members of the organization also exert powerful influence on occurrence of countercultures.

#### *Occurrence of a charismatic leader, aspiring to create his subculture*

Such a leader inspires others with his behaviour, displays modern, innovative views or views meeting employees' expectations. This new culture is inculcated by means of the leader's behaviour, results of his activity, artifacts, histories and legends being introduced by him and supporting his views; as it has taken place in John Deloren's case in «General Motors», described in J. Martin's researches [15].

***Personal features of new members of the organization***

Many researchers consider that occurrence of countercultures is frequently connected with the organization's new members, having elements of another culture, and capable to create an alternative or even opposite set of norms and values, which can break down organizational beliefs in previous success. Sometimes it is done wittingly by the organization's top leadership for the purpose of reorientation of the organizational culture to a new developmental trajectory [12].

***Personal dissatisfaction with the position in a society***

In J.N. Davidov's opinion, a person, who could not take a significant for him place in a society, revenges for his failure and joins together similar to him around him [3].

***Dissatisfaction of a group's members with working conditions, a style of management, the group's status, protection of their interests, etc. [13].***
***Deviant behaviour***

Some subcultures inside the organization work up various norms of deviant behaviour, which is counterproductive for the organization. These groups develop within themselves countercultural elements (sabotage, theft, alcohol). But only those become countercultures whose deviant behaviour assumes a refutation of main values of the company [13].

## 6.    Merger and integration

Companies' merger frequently provokes occurrence of countercultures in bought firm because of threat of its cultural identity. Probably, the degree of occurrence of countercultural tendencies will depend on that way of integration, which the top-management of the company will choose. There are three main ways of integration. They are absorption, symbiosis and autonomy. At absorption there is a full inculcation of organizational culture of the firm-buyer that probably will cause occurrence of countercultures. At symbiosis there is an adaptation of both firms, and all energies are joined together around a single purpose. In the given situation both cultures exist as long as there will be a full integration. In the third case a new firm takes an independent stand and keeps its culture, for example, when a firm is bought for development of new business areas [13].

The same tendencies, probably, will take place during integration of departments and branches.

Thus, we have defined six factors influencing on occurrence of organizational countercultures. But the given question demands further empirical researches which will allow us to confirm, specify and add the given conclusions. Knowing of reasons of occurrence of countercultures will allow leaders to be in full control of this process, therefore the given question is of great practical importance.

The following problem is coexistence of dominating culture and a counterculture in the organization. It is also a complex and insufficiently studied problem.

Dominating culture and countercultures can be partially removed from each other, exist independently in different parts of the organization or at different levels, and also exist in a complex «symbiosis» with the dominating culture [15]. And it can be countercultures both formal groups, and other social groups in the organization, for example, groups of people belonging to different generations [14]. The cooperation can develop in different ways, depending on power of dominating organizational culture and purposes of top management. On the basis of analysis of existing researches we can define the following kinds of coexistence of countercultures and dominating culture.

1. *Disputed coexistence*. A counterculture can gradually take place of dominating culture. It occurs at the time of depression of organizational culture, during crises in the company, in the presence of supporters among top management, desire of proprietors or top management. In unstable periods countercultures become especially more active and can pursue a comparatively aggressive policy of their interests' achievement [12].

2. *Controllable coexistence*. A counterculture can be used by leadership of the company in its own purposes, for example, as a source of new ideas and as a ground for testing of new ideas. If such experience is successful, it is inculcated in the organization. And if it is unsuccessful, either the department is disbanded or supporters and the leader of this counterculture are dismissed [15].

3. *Destructive coexistence*. A counterculture can loosen an organization from within, exert pernicious influence on activity's efficiency, actively oppose its set of values and norms to dominating culture and power structure, provoking crisis in the organization.

The question of coexistence of countercultures and dominating culture also requires further research because will give leadership an opportunity to choose a correct strategy in development of its organization.

As a whole the analysis both Russian, and foreign researches allows us to draw the following conclusions:

First of all, the phenomenon of countercultures is urgent and important for an organization because it touches on all main aspects of its effective functioning. Revealing of countercultures and understanding of their role and place in general culture of an organization; knowing factors, influencing on their occurrence, will give leadership an opportunity to use correctly the given phenomenon for the purpose of effective activity of the organization that cab be of a great practical importance.

Secondly, the further researches of countercultures, in our opinion, should exceed the limits of simple ascertaining of their presence in an organization, and concentrate on studying social-psychological mechanisms of their display in an organization, cooperation with other elements of organizational culture, personal features of members of countercultures, leader's influence, etc. Research of these questions will allow us to clear up the very phenomenon in an organizational context, confirm it empirically and reveal new factors of occurrence of countercultures.

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