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# **Hiring as Cultural Gatekeeping into Occupational Communities: Implications for College Students, Faculty, and Career Advisors**

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## Abstract

With the increasing price tag of college and rising student debt, the employability of graduates is a dominant narrative shaping postsecondary policy and practice. Yet, completion and the acquisition of a credential alone does not guarantee employment, and research on hiring reveals its subjective aspects, particularly when cultural signals of applicants are matched to those of organizations. In this qualitative study of 42 manufacturing firms, the prevalence of hiring for cultural fit is examined using thematic and social network methods to analyze the interviews that were conducted. Results indicate that 74% of employers hire for cultural fit, but, contrary to prior research, this matching process is not simply a matter of fitting applicant personalities to monolithic “organizational cultures” or interviewer preferences. Instead, employers match diverse applicant *dispositions* (e.g., personality, attitude) and *competencies* (e.g., cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal) to the personalities of existing staff as well as to industry-specific norms that are dominant within specific departments. The paper discusses implications of these findings for college students, faculty, and career advisors, especially in light of the potential for discriminatory practices during the job search and hiring process.

**Keywords:** higher education, student employability, skills gap, discrimination, education policy.

# **Hiring as a Process of Cultural Gatekeeping into Occupational Communities: Implications for College Students, Faculty, and Career Advisors**

**Matthew T. Hora**

Mary, a manufacturing executive, told me during an interview at a boatmaking facility that, “When people ask what keeps you from hiring someone, it’s not that they don’t have technical skills,” rather it’s their lack of “professional skills,” such as teamwork, problem-solving, and a strong work ethic. That hiring decisions are not made solely on the basis of technical acumen and credentials was also emphasized by Russell, a manager: “Brilliant jerks don’t last very long here.”

These observations contradict one of the most influential narratives about higher education and the labor market in the early 21st century—that of the “skills gap”—where a failing postsecondary sector is not providing students with adequate skills and credentials in high-demand fields where plenty of well-paying jobs await (Hora, Benbow & Oleson, 2016; Cappelli, 2015). Solutions to the skills gap typically focus on the “supply” side of the equation, primarily through the creation of clearly articulated pathways through college that lead to credentials in “hot” fields such as computer science, electrical engineering, or nursing (Barkanic, 2016; Cleary, Kerrigan, & Van Noy, 2017). Thus, so the story goes, students simply need to work hard, get into college, complete their program, acquire a degree or certificate, and gainful employment will follow (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Yet is this an accurate depiction of the relationships among college, skills, credentials, and student employability?

As Mary and Russell’s observations suggest, how applicants actually secure employment at their firms is more complicated than simply acquiring technical skills and completing college—measures underlying the human capital view of status attainment and employability—and presenting these accomplishments on a resume or job application. While a postsecondary degree confers a wage premium over a person’s lifetime (Goldin & Katz, 2007), and credentials serve important roles in “signaling” to employers important information about applicants’ capabilities and skills (Spence, 1973), a considerable body of evidence shows that employers also seek what researchers call “non-cognitive” or “soft” skills such as conscientiousness and communication (Farkas, 2003). The social capital conveyed by professional networks also influences access to information and job opportunities (Granovetter, 1995). Additionally, the cultural signals that an applicant conveys via credentials, dispositions, and tastes can act as a form of “social currency” that may influence job acquisition (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

In this paper, I explore the role that culture plays in employment decisions, and subsequent implications for postsecondary educators, advisors, and students. Specifically, the study reported here examines that critical linkage between college and the labor market—the hiring process itself. While a voluminous amount of research exists on hiring processes in personnel psychology (e.g., Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002), empirical research of hiring in education and sociology tends to assume that hiring is a “straightforward, probabilistic assessment of job candidates’ skills, abilities and future performance” based on their credentials (Deterding & Pedulla, 2016, p. 157). Instead, scholars such as Rivera (2012; 2015) argue that

hiring also is a subjective process involving processes of cultural matching, where applicants' cultural capital—conceptualized as individual resources and signals such as personality, hobbies, and dispositions—are “fit” to hiring managers' own experiences and preferences. Thus, hiring is an organizational function best viewed as involving a considerable amount of “active cultural work by employers” (Rivera, 2012, p. 1018). Consequently, the role that culture plays in facilitating (or thwarting) employability is a crucial question for scholars studying college student career readiness and stratification processes, as well as for students, career advisors, and educators interested in how the college experience can best prepare graduates for a challenging and potentially capricious labor market.

Yet several empirical, conceptual, and practical questions remain about the notion and actual processes of hiring as an exercise in cultural matching or ascertaining fit. First, research on cultural matching has focused on hiring in elite fields such as law or finance, with less known about how these phenomena may unfold in blue-collar occupations or industries such as manufacturing. Second, when the culture construct is used, it is rarely defined and too often used as a generic, catch-all construct (Ferrare & Hora, 2014; Lizardo, 2017). While the idea of cultural capital avoids the excesses of this tendency for ambiguity, its use in empirical work faces several challenges including limited specification of the multidimensionality of construct (i.e., objectified, institutionalized, and embodied forms), and insufficient attention to the specific content of cultural capital (e.g., highbrow tastes or academic knowledge) (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). In addition, given the predominance of the notion that “organizational culture” plays a critical role in hiring (Chatman, 1989; Rivera, 2012), it is essential to specify the relationship between individual-level cultural signals and contextual features of organizations (Lave, 1988; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), without falling into the trap of assuming a singular, internally coherent “culture” ascribed to entire firms (Martin, 2002). Finally, and most salient for postsecondary researchers, educators, and college students themselves, while a cultural turn is evident in career advising (e.g., Leong, 2010), this focus has centered on student identity and not on hiring, such that implications of these issues for students, educators, and advisors have not yet been explored.

I present new data regarding the characteristics and processes of hiring for cultural fit, with a focus on how diverse forms of applicants' embodied cultural capital are conceptualized and “matched” to features of organizational contexts and situations. Using thematic and social network analysis techniques, I analyzed interview data from 42 companies ( $N=58$  individuals) in manufacturing firms in Wisconsin to address the following questions:

1. How prevalent is hiring for cultural fit?
2. How, if at all, do employers conceptualize their organizational cultures in relation to hiring procedures?
3. What are the primary attributes and competencies employers seek in job applicants? and,
4. What are the steps taken during screening procedures, and to what degree are considerations of cultural fit evident?

Analyses revealed that hiring for cultural fit is prevalent among this group of manufacturing employers and that employers scrutinize a diverse range of applicants' cultural capital. However, in estimating cultural fit, employers do not simply match applicant attributes to their personal experiences or preferences, but instead construct notions of their "organizational culture" comprising shared norms, organizational contexts, and attributes of group members. These elements were considered with respect to departments where positions were open, such that evaluations of cultural fit involved mapping applicant attributes to those of specific work groups or what Van Maanen and Barley (1984) call "occupational communities." Consequently, the hiring process—especially the job interview—represents a gatekeeping mechanism where applicants can be excluded on the basis of attributes unrelated to merit or technical expertise if they do not fit or match the norms, behaviors, and dispositions of existing staff. The data highlight the fact that the "demand" side of the higher education-workforce equation, and implications of hiring for cultural fit for college student employability, deserves as much attention as the purported lack of skills demonstrated by college students (Cappelli, 2015; Cottom, 2017).

## **Background**

In this section I briefly review the literature that touches upon issues related to education-labor market dynamics, which spans a variety of disciplines including sociology, labor economics, management, cultural anthropology, and counseling psychology. After discussing various forms of capital, I use insights from situated cognition theory and relational sociology to describe a new approach to conceptualizing how culture operates at the individual and organizational levels during the hiring process.

### **How Three Forms of Capital Are Used to Explain Employability and Labor Market Outcomes**

Dominant approaches to researching the relationship between education and employment rely on the notion of capital as a critical determinant of an individual's ability to get a job. In each of the three distinct forms of capital that appear in the literature—human, social, and cultural—the general idea is that various resources are utilized (whether consciously by the capital holder or not) to acquire prestige, power, and positions in society.

The most influential theory of the relationship between education and employment, particularly in sociology and labor economics, has been human capital theory (Cleary, Kerrigan, & Van Noy, 2017; Livingstone, 2009). A key idea is that education effectively influences "future real income through the embedding of resources in people" (Becker, 1964, p. 9), and that rational actors will invest in education in order to increase their prospects in the labor market (Schulz, 1962). Human capital theory has informed decades of research examining why people with higher levels of education have higher wages and status (Becker, 1994; Bills, 2003).

Another influential body of research sorts models that focus on how credentials signal competencies as well as how employers screen and evaluate applicants (Weiss, 1995). This scholarship is particularly influential in economics and addresses how actors make decisions in a host of uncertain situations involving transactions between parties (Bills, 2003). From the employers' perspective, given that job applicant competencies cannot be directly observed in a

resume or application, schooling signals potential variability in productivity and performance (Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975).

Another issue in the literature pertains to how employers interpret the value of educational credentials, and their worth relative to other applicant attributes. This issue can be complex given the potential for credentials to act as a double screen or filter via admission and then graduation processes (Arrow, 1973). Despite debate about whether schooling itself (and not credentials) confers advantages in the labor market, evidence suggests that degrees are important signals of competency (Jaeger & Page, 1996). Furthermore, credentials from high-status institutions convey a sense of legitimacy and cultural prestige to applicants for elite positions, while for less skilled positions, employers may be more focused on candidates' technical skills (Deming, Yuchtman, Abulafi, Goldin, & Katz, 2016). Deterding and Pedulla (2016) also found that employers hiring for low-skill positions prioritize degrees over institutions, even to the point of ignoring the fact that some institutions in an experimental study were fictional.

Further complicating matters, studies of employer hiring criteria, particularly during job interviews, have found that evaluations of candidates (particularly those with similar credentials) focus on firm-specific criteria rather than general employability or personal traits (e.g., leadership) (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). Research on person-organization fit confirms the value that employers place on ensuring that a new hire's values and personality aligns with existing organizational traits (Chatman, 1989; Sheridan, 1992). This literature also demonstrated that estimations of fit occur at different levels, between job applicants and jobs, organizations, supervisors, and work groups (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

Also helping explain the relationship between education and employment is social capital, which can be thought of as the resources and opportunities embedded in the social structure (e.g., relationships and networks) that are mobilized by actors to achieve their goals (Lin, 1999). Social networks are particularly important with respect to the provision of resources, because they can facilitate the flow of important information (e.g., job tips, personal contacts) between loosely coupled communities, and reinforce and/or convey prestige and position through the association with other actors in a network (Burt, 1997; Lin, 1999). Research on the relationship between social capital and employment has shown that social contacts and ties play a critical role in alerting people to job openings and sharing connections (Granovetter, 1995).

Theories of cultural forms of capital have also been used to explore the relationships among education, employability, and social stratification. Bourdieu's (1986) influential theory posited a dialectical relationship among distinct forms of capital (e.g., cultural, social, and economic), the field or context of social structure in which people and organizations are positioned, and habitus (i.e., internalized dispositions and norms). In contrast to human capital theory, which Bourdieu (1986) argued reduces the social world to an ahistorical "mercantile exchange," a focus on the transmission of cultural capital best explains how educational investments influence an individuals' subsequent social positioning (p. 46). For Bourdieu (1986), three forms of cultural capital exist: *objectified* forms refer to paintings and other physical artifacts that denote cultural knowledge; *institutionalized* forms include academic credentials that convey symbolic (or actual) knowledge and social standing; and *embodied* forms refers to dispositions, knowledge, and

habits. The latter type of cultural capital is particularly relevant to this paper's focus on education and hiring, as it encompasses the skills, knowledge, and abilities that are slowly internalized throughout childhood and schooling (Bourdieu, 1986).

While early research on cultural capital within educational contexts focused on the construct primarily in terms of elite or highbrow tastes and markers (e.g., DiMaggio, 1982), later theorists argued that cultural capital should refer to a broader range of knowledge and habits—even technical and academic knowledge—that are reproduced across generations and are used for “social and cultural exclusion” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 587). Another salient feature of cultural capital theory for this study is that it can be instantiated in both physical and organizational forms. Within organizations, which can be viewed as miniature “fields” in which positions are taken and capital accrued (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008), cultural capital can become institutionalized as widely shared norms or “evaluative criteria” that govern expectations and behaviors of group members (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 588). The existence of cultural capital at the group-level has two important implications: first, it means that cultural capital is not solely an individual-level resource or phenomenon; and second, that a recursive relationship exists between individuals and their cultural environments, such that an individual's repertoire of cultural capital can be viewed as the result of the “subjectification of objective structures within the mind and body of the singular actor” (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 25). Furthermore, cultural capital should be viewed as embedded in specific places, situations, and contexts, where particular dispositions or credentials are assigned value, reproduced, and rewarded. As Winkle-Wagner (2010) explained, “cultural capital is relevant only in the field, or marketplace, in which it is recognized and given value” (p. 94). The contextualization of cultural capital is especially salient for this paper, because the dispositions and knowledge that students may acquire in their homes, K–12 schooling, or their college education may or may not be highly valued (and rewarded) when they attempt to gain entry into a new field, industry, or company.

### **Hiring as Cultural Matching**

In a study of the role that culture plays in the relationship between education and employment, Rivera (2012; 2015) drew upon cultural capital theory to examine one of the understudied aspects of this dynamic—that of hiring itself. Arguing that prior research on hiring in sociology viewed the process as an overly straightforward “matching process between organizational characteristics, job demands, and applicants' skills,” Rivera (2012, p. 1000) argued that sociologists studying work and hiring had underutilized and undertheorized the role of culture. In particular, Rivera (2015) adopted a view of culture as individual-level resources, defining culture as, “frames of knowledge, perception, interpretation, and behavior we use to navigate the social world” (p. 6). With a focus on ascertaining whether and how these cultural resources functioned as “mechanisms of inequality,” Rivera (2012; 2015) interviewed 120 employers in elite law, banking, and management firms, finding that hiring decisions were largely based on cultural matching or fit that unfolded in three ways.

First, some companies have explicit organizational policies to assess cultural fit, where hiring managers evaluate the degree to which applicants are aligned with the “organizational culture”

(e.g., an independent corporate culture) and/or with “a firm’s existing employee base in leisure pursuits, background, and self-presentation” (Rivera, 2012, p. 1007). Second, hiring managers paid particularly close attention to similarities between their own experiences and backgrounds and those of job applicants. Finally, hiring managers evaluated “fit” on the basis of their affective, personal connections with applicants, such as positive responses based on similar hobbies or backgrounds. Rivera (2012) found that employers want to hire not only “competent colleagues” but also potential friends, such that hiring involved “organizational, cognitive, and affective processes [that] reinforced one another to create new hire classes that mirrored firms’ existing employees in cultural signals and lifestyle markers” (p. 1017). As a result, hiring can act as a form of cultural gatekeeping and exclusion, where applicants lacking similar characteristics to existing staff (e.g., race, age, gender) could be less likely to obtain a job. Discrimination during the hiring process on the basis of these attributes has been repeatedly confirmed on the basis of racial (Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017) and class markers (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2017), leading marginalized groups to deliberately downplay such characteristics when job seeking (Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun 2016). Thus, Rivera’s (2012; 2015) work provides an invaluable contribution to the literature on hiring and the role that education, competencies, culture, and demographics play in shaping stratification processes and an individual’s success (or lack thereof) in the labor market.

### **A New Approach to Studying Cultural Capital in Organizations and Hiring Practices**

Given evidence regarding the subjective and sociocultural aspects of hiring, more nuanced accounts of the relationship between higher education and employment outcomes are required than are available using the dominant human capital framework. The cultural capital account is particularly well suited to address these aspects of hiring processes, but several conceptual problems with how the construct is used in empirical research must be addressed.

A primary issue facing cultural research in sociology and education is the tendency for the construct to be poorly defined and operationally specified. For instance, Lizardo (2017) argues that too often scholars adopt “one-size-fits-all proposals, deploying the term ‘culture’ as a generic category of analysis” that fails to specify the form, content, and enactment or use of cultural phenomena (p. 88). While this problem is most evident in conceptions of culture that ascribe singular and internally coherent norms or behaviors to entire populations (e.g., the “Japanese” culture) or institutions (e.g., “managerial” universities) (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008), the issue of insufficient specification also affects research on cultural capital.

First, based on Bourdieu’s (1986) account, cultural capital can take three distinct forms—objectified, institutionalized, and embodied—that represent a variety of phenomena including physical artifacts, institutional standards, and psychological traits and aptitudes. Yet prior work on cultural capital in hiring has focused entirely on embodied cultural capital (i.e., dispositions) (Rivera, 2012). This focus overlooks institutionalized forms of cultural capital that are essential in estimating fit and hiring decisions. These forms include group-level norms and “evaluative criteria” that schools, universities, or firms employ regarding appropriate behavior or desirable knowledge, which ultimately may serve to exclude particular people, groups, or behaviors

(Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 588). Thus, analyses of cultural capital in hiring processes must account for more than just individual-level characteristics such as hobbies, dispositions, and traits (i.e., embodied cultural capital), but also the physical artifacts and institutional standards that embody a group's norms (Lizardo, 2017).

Second, given that one of the biggest points of contention in cultural capital research is the content or composition of the construct, it is essential to articulate in precise terms what particular dispositions or standards are signifying status or value to observers (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). In particular, early research on cultural capital focused primarily (if not exclusively) on highbrow or elite tastes, a perspective that has been challenged on grounds that other types of knowledge or dispositions—such as technical knowledge, interpersonal competencies, and academic expertise—may also serve to reproduce inequality or obtain positions in society (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). With a more expansive view, it becomes possible to consider that a variety of aptitudes and traits may act as embodied forms of cultural capital and signals.

Third, the relationship between the environment and cultural capital is too rarely explicated, especially how the context and composition of organizations influence individuals' dispositions. A de-contextualized view of cultural capital is problematic given that some core ideas of Bourdieu's sociology are that "capital" only makes sense in relation to the field in which it is assigned value (Martin, 2003). However, the influence of the context is not solely about the assignment of value to particular artifacts, norms, or dispositions. Instead, the environment itself—whether an organization's standards or status hierarchies—also acts as a form of source material for individuals to internalize into their own cognitive structures (Lizardo, 2004). Thus, cultural capital is not merely derived from parental tastes and habits, but involves the "subjectification of objective structures" from the entirety of one's environment into "the mind and body of the singular actor" (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 25). These ideas are not dissimilar from theories of situated cognition, which posit that mental representations are inextricably linked to the situations in which information was encoded (Brown, Collins, & DuGuid, 1989), such that cognition can be thought of as comprising the "dialectical relations among people acting, the contexts of their activity, and the activity itself" (Lave, 1988, p. 148). These ideas suggest that it is insufficient to only document how applicants' attributes are "matched" to individual hiring managers' attributes or the "shared values" of a firm (Rivera, 2012), but that it is also necessary to scrutinize how both individual- and organization-level cultural resources are influenced by and/or embedded in contextual forces within and external to the firm (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Finally, the notion of "organizational culture" or group-level cultural forms and their relationship to individual-level cultural capital has not been well explicated. While a panoply of conceptions and definitions of organizational culture exist in the literature, a common view is that an organization's culture is a singular, internally coherent system of norms and beliefs that can be ascribed to entire institutions and group members (Chatman, 1989; DiMaggio, 1997; Martin, 2002). In fact, reporting that her respondents used the term to discuss the cultural aspects of hiring, Rivera (2015) offered the following definition of organizational culture: the "shared values that delineate appropriate workplace behavior" (p. 156). However, such a focus on values

and norms ascribed to entire populations and firms is untenable. Many culture theorists have long dispensed with the unitary view of organizational culture in favor of the notion that culture is contested and variable within organizations and instead resides within smaller units (i.e., subcultures) (Martin, 2002; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Further, individuals are not synonymous with essentialist notions of group culture because people encode and internalize a variety of norms and standards from their various spheres of influence (e.g., family, peers, school, work), which some call “cultural models” (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). In fact, any given individual (i.e., job applicant, hiring manager) may hold multiple, even contradictory cultural models internalized from different groups, experiences, and phases of their lives. Furthermore, accounts of culture within organizations must also consider other manifestations including physical artifacts, structural features of the firm, and broader contextual forces affecting the organization.

Given these considerations about culture theory, I examine how multifaceted forms of embodied cultural capital are evaluated by employers with respect to individual- and group-level norms, practices, and artifacts. These phenomena are scrutinized with close attention to the impacts that contextual or situational factors may play in shaping how particular cultural signals are valued or utilized, and how these processes may act as forms of cultural gatekeeping and exclusion (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In addition to contributing to the literature on hiring, another goal of the analysis is to generate actionable knowledge for college students, educators, and advisors with respect to the cultural aspects of job acquisition. While a cultural turn is evident in student affairs and career advising (e.g., Leong, 2010), this literature has largely centered on student identity and not how hiring itself is a cultural process. Similarly, prior work on “fit” in higher education has focused on students’ choice of majors based on their self-efficacy, gender, and course-taking patterns in high school (Porter & Umbach, 2006; Wang, 2013) or students’ fit with classroom environments (Pawlowska, Westerman, Bergman, & Huelsman, 2014), with little attention paid to the processes of “fit” from college to the workplace. Thus, a focus of this paper is how students can be prepared for the potentially subjective and exclusionary nature of hiring, and how educators and advisors can disrupt the reproduction of inequity via instruction and advising.

## **Methods**

The qualitative study reported in this paper was part of a larger research project examining how postsecondary educators and employers in similar industries conceptualized and taught or trained valued workplace competencies. For this project, I visited six regions of the state with two colleagues to conduct interviews and site visits with staff in 42 firms. We elected to focus on advanced manufacturing, given its prominence in the state’s economy. In the manufacturing sector, which encompasses a wide range of subsectors (e.g., food, clothing, and furniture manufacturing), we focused exclusively on machinery, electrical equipment, and fabricated metal product manufacturing given the long-standing presence of these types of manufacturing in Wisconsin.

Within each region we used a non-random purposive sampling technique to populate the sampling frames using searches of online Chamber of Commerce listings and industry-specific membership guides. Companies were included in the sampling frame if they employed more than

two people and met industrial subsector criteria (e.g., no pharmaceutical or food manufacturers). Individuals included in the sampling frames were limited to human resource staff and/or company executives, based on the premise that these individuals would have direct knowledge of hiring procedures in their firms. Respondents were contacted via telephone or email requesting their participation. We contacted 171 companies, and 42 participated for a response rate of 25%. A total of 58 individuals from these companies self-selected into the study, with the larger number of subjects than companies based on the fact that in some cases more than one interviewee participated from a single company, with company representatives often selecting who would attend the interviews (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Description of Full Sample**

	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Companies</b>
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
<b>Total</b>	58	42
<b>Company Size</b>		
1–49	13	10
50–99	13	11
100–249	21	13
250+	11	8

### **Data Collection**

All data were collected by the team of three researchers (including the author) between late 2013 and early 2015. Prior to fieldwork, all researchers received intensive training with the research protocols, and they followed appropriate institutional review procedures for human subjects research prior to data collection activities.

The team designed a semi-structured interview protocol that included 13 questions, all of which were explicitly focused on non-managerial entry level positions within a firm. Thus, respondents were directed to not answer questions for job categories such as sales or management, but instead to think on entry-level positions related to technical work in the company. Each respondent was asked the same battery of questions such as, “What are your thoughts on the quality of the applicant pool for entry-level positions?” “What factors influence your hiring decisions?” “Does anything else influence your decision to hire someone besides if they meet the necessary skill qualifications for the position?” and “What skills are non-negotiable in terms of things you can’t train people on?” Given the semi-structured interview approach, interviewers also pursued emergent lines of inquiry that were unanticipated (e.g., elaborations on the nature of organizational cultures). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

## Data Analysis

To analyze these data I used a combination of techniques including inductive thematic analysis, social network analysis, and a structured approach to grounded theory. The first step was to segment the interview transcripts into smaller and more manageable units. The research team collaboratively developed an initial code list pertaining to global categories in the data and applied the code list to the entire corpus of data. Then, text fragments that were coded under “hiring practices,” “organizational culture,” and “valued skillsets” were examined in greater detail.

The first stage of analysis involved an inductive process of theme identification, where two analysts (including the author) used an open-coding process to review the raw data and note in the margins important details related to hiring and/or noted incidents where ideas or events were repeated across respondents (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Upon encountering that detail in later text fragments, the analysts compared each successive instance of a code to previous instances to confirm or alter the code/definition (i.e., the constant comparative method) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After several rounds of reliability checking and revision to the code list, the entire dataset was reviewed once more and instances of codes within the data, as well as illustrative quotes and respondent information, were noted in a separate document.

While social network analysis is often used to study relationships between actors, and the flow of information and/or resources among them, the technique can also be used to explore the structure and network of ideas held by insider groups (Jack, 2010). Thus, for this analysis, our focus is to ascertain the underlying structure whereby participants conceptualized the relations among organizational culture and job applicant attributes. The data for the analysis was in the form of a two-mode (or “affiliation”) matrix that consists of respondents as rows (mode 1) and codes pertaining to organizational culture and applicant attributes as columns (mode 2). Using UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002), the two-mode data matrix was transformed into a one-mode (code-by-code) matrix, which resulted in a co-occurrence matrix in which each cell corresponds to the number of instances where code *i* is affiliated with code *j*. Next, we used the program NetDraw (Borgatti, 2002) to graph the co-occurrences between pairs of codes. The thickness of lines connecting a pair of codes indicates how frequently they were reported together by respondents, with thicker lines correspond to stronger co-occurrences (i.e., affiliations). Then, the betweenness of each node was calculated, which measures the degree to which a node controls flows between and among other codes within a network (Borgatti, 2005).

Next, I utilized a structured approach to grounded theory to analyze the final codes and affiliation graphs in light of external theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). With theoretical perspectives from culturally situated practice in mind (Lave, 1988), cognitivist views of culture (Lizardo, 2017), and subcultures within organizations (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985), I reviewed results from earlier analyses (i.e., codes and affiliation graphs) and organized the data into particular categories based on their conceptual similarity and adherence to the cultural theories guiding the work. These analyses led to a new conceptual framework for understanding the role of cultural phenomena in hiring and screening processes.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the evidence reported in this paper. First, the small and self-selected nature of the sample precludes the generalizability of the results to the larger population of employers in Wisconsin and/or in the selected industries. Second, the interview protocol directed respondents to consider entry-level positions while answering, but did not specify the experience and/or education required for these positions. Thus, some respondents could have answered the interview questions thinking of positions requiring a bachelor's degree while others considered positions requiring other credentials. That said, the occupations commonly referenced by participants included those requiring some postsecondary training but not a bachelor's degree, such as machinists, welders, or computer numeric controlled machine operators. Third, the data reflect self-reported behaviors, and the lack of independent verification means that it is possible that the specific hiring behaviors described by respondents are not consistent with actual behaviors. Finally, these data do not include the perspectives of those who have a unique and important perspective on the issues addressed in this paper—that of students and employees.

## **Results**

In this section I report the results of data analyses that address each of the following topics: (1) prevalence of and rationale behind hiring for cultural fit; (2) conceptions of organizational culture; (3) conceptions of valued applicant cultural capital; (4) how attributes of organizational culture and applicant attributes are mapped to one another; and (5) specific processes respondents used to screen applicants and assess cultural fit.

### **1. Prevalence of and Rationale Behind Hiring for “Cultural Fit”**

In response to questions regarding employer experiences with the current labor market and criteria used for hiring, respondents from 74% of the firms (31) in the study explicitly stated that the hiring process involved assessing applicants' fit with the “organizational culture.” For instance, a director of operations at a manufacturing firm observed that interviewing candidates wasn't just about assessing their technical competencies, but also involved “evaluating how well they're going to fit in the organization.” This statement echoes the sentiment of an HR professional, who observed that “people who are just absolutely perfect on paper” may not be the best choice, and that other characteristics influence hiring decisions, especially “fit” with the corporate culture.

As for why hiring for cultural fit is desirable, respondents discussed a variety of outcomes that they perceived as dependent on new employees' having a good fit with the company. These outcomes included reduced staff turnover, enhanced cohesion among department and/or work group members, and individual employee satisfaction and productivity. As one manufacturer stated, “The most important thing is they [the applicant] have to sound like they'll fit in with the culture, [be]cause that's one of the biggest things about someone being successful or not—are they happy to come to work?” However, not all study respondents reported hiring with cultural fit in mind. For some employers, hiring was simply a matter of finding technically astute and/or competent individuals who could adequately perform the job, while others utilized different screening criteria altogether such as health (i.e., explicitly seeking healthy applicants) or geography (i.e., only hiring people living near the company facilities). Next, I decompose the process of

hiring for cultural fit into its constituent parts: namely, the specific elements of an organization’s culture and applicant attributes that respondents considered when making hiring decisions.

## 2. Conceptions of Organizational Culture

It is important to note that many spoke in vague, ill-defined terms about culture. For instance, one respondent stated that, “I would describe the culture as being very family-like,” whereas another reported that their company culture was about “our values, our vision, and our mission.” Such ambiguous conceptions of culture are not dissimilar from the ways in which the construct is often used in the literature, which underscores the need for defining the term in as precise a manner as possible (Lizardo, 2017; Martin, 2002).

In cases where culture was not discussed in vague terms, respondents’ accounts of their firm’s culture were not limited to beliefs or assumptions held by group members (e.g., Rivera, 2012), nor could they be ascribed to “types” of institutions (e.g., Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008). Instead, study respondents thought of their company’s culture in terms of four distinct yet interrelated elements: shared beliefs (i.e., cognitive schemata), routinized practices, group member characteristics, and the salient features of the local context in which both beliefs and practices regularly arise (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Respondent Conceptions of the Organizational Culture**

Shared beliefs	Routinized practices	Group member characteristics	Salient features of the local contexts
Corporate values (9)	Nature of work (13)	People/existing staff (7)	Industry (10)
Employee-focused (4)			Company climate (8)
Work-related norms and expectations (4)	Team-oriented tasks (8)	Age of employees (6)	Admin unit/level of organization (7)
Business goals (3)			Size of company (5)
			Ownership type (5)
			Organizational structure (5)
			Hierarchy/authority (4)
			Age of company (3)
			Geography (2)
			Evolution/change (2)

**Shared beliefs.** Several study respondents discussed beliefs and assumptions that they felt were widely held or shared by company leaders and employees. For nine respondents, the notion of “corporate values” was seen as an important and pervasive aspect of their company’s culture. In these cases, the term was not defined and was used as an ambiguous catch-all construct, making it impossible to discern precisely what these values were. Four respondents were more specific and stated that an “employee-focused” culture was held by company leaders, where

policies and the overall organization reflected the belief that employees should be well-compensated and treated fairly. Finally, three respondents stated that “business goals” were foundational assumptions widely shared across the organization and represented a key feature of their organizational culture. Of course, no evidence exists regarding whether these values or beliefs were in fact real and/or distributed across employees, but what is reported here is respondent perceptions of institutionalized norms and standards.

Another type of shared schemata pertains to that of work-related norms and expectations. These views encompass ideas about professionalism, how to handle machinery, task performance, and appropriate working hours. For instance, one executive stated that, “We had one fellow ask if he could come in at 10 at night, and I thought, what good does it do for you to be here all by yourself at 10 when we’re working together as a team?” This view reflects a strongly held assumption that staff will work during 9–5 working hours because most projects are team-based and thus require the attendance of all personnel at the same time.

**Routinized practices.** The next aspect of organizational culture discussed by study respondents was that of routinized behaviors and practices within the company. In this context, 13 respondents discussed the tasks that employees performed on a daily basis, whether running lab experiments, trouble-shooting computer numeric controlled machines, or cutting molds—the idea being that these routine tasks themselves constitute a workplace culture. As one employer said, “We basically define culture as the way things get done around here.” In addition, respondents also observed that team-oriented elements of their work was an important part of organizational culture. One supervisor noted that their organizational culture was “team-driven,” and that he tells people that, “if you are not comfortable working in a team and having the collaborative mentality on how to reach a solution you will not be successful within this organization. You can’t be a cowboy.”

**Group member characteristics.** Thirteen employers spoke of individual attributes of employees as key aspects in their organizational culture. For example, seven respondents described their company culture in terms of characteristics of existing staff. One manufacturer spoke of his staff having “strong personalities” or personnel where “you have to earn their respect.” In another company, a hiring manager described a lunchroom that was “loud and kind of obnoxious,” and when hiring, there is a consideration about whether that person would “fit in.” Thus, for some organizations, the work units and personnel within them are viewed as a type of community or social group, and it is for this group that hiring managers often try to find a good “fit.”

Another aspect of personnel characteristics is that of employee age. Six respondents discussed their organization’s culture in terms of the age (e.g., “young” or “older and traditional”) of their employees. Along with these observations about age were often perceptions of the attendant beliefs and norms exhibited by these groups, such as older workers having less flexibility and more conservative personalities and worldviews.

**Salient features of local contexts.** Ten themes were identified that captured locally salient features of the organizational context that respondents discussed with respect to their organizational cultures. Here, I describe several of these themes in greater detail.

Ten employers pointed to the *unique nature of their industry* as a central feature of their organizational culture. In fact, some equated this culture with the industry itself, stating that their company had a “lean manufacturing culture” or a “continuous improvement culture,” two terms associated with modern approaches to manufacturing. In this way, how work was organized and performed within specific industrial contexts was seen as synonymous with “culture.”

Several organizational characteristics were mentioned in relation to company cultures. Seven respondents described the *administrative unit* where a job opening existed as where culture existed. This idea that cultural forms such as shared schemata and routines can develop within small, bounded groups or subcultures is not new in organizational studies (e.g., Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), where emphasis is placed on occupational groups within departments as a particularly influential site for cultural forms to develop.

Five respondents stated that their culture was inextricably tied to *company size*. In small companies, many staff played multiple, overlapping roles, which one respondent described as necessitating “a culture of flexibility” and another as “a culture of wearing many hats to get the work done.” In larger companies, respondents spoke about a similar need for flexibility but in relation to interacting with diverse populations. One multinational company considered its corporate culture to be one of “openness” given its employees regular interactions with people from many different countries and backgrounds.

*Ownership type* and *age of the company* were considered synonymous with or closely linked to organizational cultures. For example, family owned businesses were highlighted as places where the culture was a reflection (and legacy) of the company’s founder(s). In one case, a family had employed generations of machinists in a small city in northern Wisconsin, leading to a corporate identity as a cultural cornerstone of the community. In this case, new employees were viewed as needing to respect and embrace this culture. The age of a company was viewed by three respondents as an influential aspect of their organizational culture. Some employers stressed that they have a “young” company culture, with an energetic and casual work environment similar to the prototypical Silicon Valley “startup culture.” In contrast, three employers characterized their companies (and employees) as having “traditional cultures,” which was tied to the age of the company. One manufacturer, observing that his decades-old company was largely staffed by men in their mid- to late-50s who had been with the company for over 20 years, had “an older culture [where people] are very set in their ways.”

Eight respondents discussed *company climate* as an important aspect of the organizational culture. For these respondents, climate was discussed in terms of the “atmosphere” or “feeling” present among a particular work group or even across the company, which is not dissimilar to how organizational climate theorists view the construct in contrast to the more deeply-held and tacit notion of culture (Denison, 1996). For instance, one respondent described her company as having “a very friendly atmosphere, so we want people who are friendly and respectful.” Consequently, the organizational climate can be viewed as individuals’ perceptions of interpersonal aspects.

*Geographic location* was cited by two respondents. For example, the culture of one company was viewed as closely aligned with the small town where the facility was located, such that potential

employees from large and/or distant cities were discouraged, based on the notion that they would have a hard time adjusting to the local culture, which was strongly shaped by outdoor pursuits.

*Management style of the company* and how this relates to organizational structure was cited by four respondents. One noted that their company had a “flat,” or non-hierarchical organizational structure that shaped employee-management interactions, which were seen as a central feature of the company culture. The personal attributes necessary to succeed in this environment, where decision-making was decentralized, led this employer to seek out applicants who have a “whatever it takes” attitude instead of someone who constantly needs guidance and supervision.

### **3. Conceptions of Valued Applicant Cultural Capital**

Next, I report data on applicants’ characteristics that employers seek when making entry-level hires. While not linked to specific hiring decisions, these data were provided in the context of how the company currently viewed and assessed entry-level applicants. The findings are organized into two categories: individual applicant attributes and external factors shaping these attributes. The attributes represent the types of cultural capital held by job applicants, especially the skills, knowledge, abilities and dispositions that they have internalized from their schooling, family, peers, and social environment (See Table 3).

**Individual applicant attributes.** Applicant attributes discussed by respondents were placed into four categories: dispositions (i.e., tastes, habits and personality traits—attributes commonly associated with embodied forms of cultural capital), interpersonal competencies (i.e., aptitudes involving social interactions), intrapersonal competencies (i.e., aptitudes related to self-regulation), and cognitive competencies (i.e., knowledge and reasoning capabilities). These categories are based on a combination of the data and a widely used framework for studying valuable academic and workplace competencies (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012).

*Dispositions.* An important characteristic of job applicants that respondents discussed pertains to the applicant’s personality and attitude. Thirteen employers reported that specific personality traits of applicants were considered indicators or markers of whether or not the person would fit the organizational culture. While some used vague terms, such as having a “good personality,” others were more specific, stating that they sought applicants with “cheerful” or “respectful” personalities. In other cases, a specific personality type was not the issue, but finding someone who could match the personalities of existing staff was the overriding concern. For example, one employer stated that, “You’re not necessarily plugging in the right skill set but you gotta plug in the right personality.” Another person said,

We do not have show dogs [in the department] so to speak.... [I]f we actually brought one in, it would totally rock that department we place that person in. Just because everyone else in the department, again, while maybe is talented, is just humble and the team is more important than the I. So there would be a lot of friction caused by that mix.

**Table 3. Job Applicant Attributes (i.e., Cultural Capital) Considered Valuable by Employers**

Individual Applicant Attributes	Factors Shaping Individual Attributes
<p><b>Dispositions</b></p> <p>Positive attitude (17)</p> <p>Personality type (13)</p> <p>Patience (1)</p>	<p>Upbringing (9)</p> <p>Age (5)</p> <p>Military (1)</p>
<p><b>Interpersonal competencies</b></p> <p>Team player (10)</p> <p>Communication skills (6)</p> <p>Personable (3)</p> <p>Cultural competency (1)</p>	<p>Ethnic/national (1)</p>
<p><b>Intrapersonal competencies</b></p> <p>Work ethic (14)</p> <p>Learnability (9)</p> <p>Honesty/integrity (5)</p> <p>Adaptability (4)</p> <p>Adhere company values (4)</p> <p>Self-motivated (4)</p> <p>Takes responsibility (2)</p>	
<p><b>Cognitive competencies</b></p> <p>Handy/mechanical (3)</p>	

Note: These data include attributes that respondents discussed in relation to ascertaining cultural fit, and do not represent the entirety of desirable applicant attributes (e.g., education credentials, work experience) that may impact hiring decisions.

Seventeen employers spoke about the importance of a positive attitude, with some viewing it as *the* most important indicator of cultural fit and suitability for the job. One stated that they hire for “attitude, attitude, attitude, and attitude” alone, while another unequivocally stated that, “the cultural fit is the attitude fit.” One executive stated that he “works all the angles” from personal contacts to hosting multiple interns, all with the goal not to find the student with exceptional technical skills, but “to find a person with the right attitude.”

*Interpersonal competencies.* Another set of applicant attributes that employers scrutinized pertains to interpersonal competencies. These include communication skills, particularly oral communication and negotiation, and the ability to effectively work in teams and get along with others. Given that many research laboratories and manufacturing facilities are organized around small teams, these aptitudes were in some cases a non-negotiable skillset that applicants needed to have. An issue that respondents raised in relation to these competencies was that of humility, which was seen as an indispensable part of being a team player. As one hiring manager said, “We are a ‘we’ place.... The football Randy Mosses of the world or Terrell Owens of the world would not be successful here,” referring to athletes who are popularly known as self-centered.

Another respondent felt that these particular attributes were not too complicated, “just all the things that makes a good Kindergartener, frankly.”

While only one respondent mentioned cultural competence as an important interpersonal competency, it is worth highlighting given the growing diversification of U.S. society and the labor market. This employer noted that in recent years their workplace had become more racially diverse, with the corresponding need for employees who could be tolerant, flexible in their thinking, and accepting of differences. For this respondent, the global economy also necessitated that staff had the ability to work well with clients and co-workers from other countries, and not adopt the attitude of “it’s my way or the highway” when it came to behavioral and workplace norms specific to a particular cultural group or ethnicity.

*Intrapersonal competencies.* The next set of desirable attributes are intrapersonal competencies, or characteristics pertaining to an individual’s values, beliefs, and motivations as well as her/his ability to self-monitor and self-manage. The most valued intrapersonal attribute was work ethic, which 14 respondents discussed in terms that included hard work, delayed gratification, persistence, and basic employability. This multidimensional view of work ethic as not solely about one’s dedication to work or willingness to work long hours is consistent with research on the topic (e.g., Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2002).

Nine respondents highlighted the importance of an applicant’s ability and/or willingness to learn new things as a critical attribute. Given the changing nature of work procedures and scientific or industrial developments, employers highly value employees who can continually learn. This competency is similar to the notion of “lifelong learning” or “self-regulated learning,” which raises important questions about job applicants’ aptitudes for establishing learning goals, using effective study strategies, and self-monitoring progress (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). A related issue is workplace training and whether or not employers provide staff with opportunities for continual learning and professional development.

Besides desiring employees who could learn new technologies and tools, respondents also discussed the need for people who were adaptable or not stuck in their ways based on prior work experience. For example, four respondents described looking for “moldable” applicants, or those who were a “fresh slate” and could be trained in the company’s unique processes and procedures. Another manufacturing employer similarly reported wanting someone who was “young in their careers, very moldable in terms of how they fit into a culture.” One employer explained that it was preferable to train someone from scratch, rather than have them come in with strong expectations for how things should be done, because “then we have to unteach them because every company does stuff differently.” Indeed, given the notion that if a person fit the culture and was a good learner, and the company “can mold the rest” via training, it appears that some employers seek enthusiastic, continually learning employees rather than exclusively seeking those with the right credentials and technical expertise.

*Cognitive competencies.* The final category of desirable applicant attributes is cognitive competencies, which include technical knowledge and skills, as well as reasoning skills such as critical thinking. In regard to cultural fit, some respondents specifically mentioned mechanical

skills, including the familiarity with machinery and tools and/or a general understanding of electrical or scientific principles related to the work. Respondents also spoke of the need for employees who were good problem solvers and/or troubleshooters, who could address inevitable problems that arose in the workplace, whether it be a broken piece of machinery or an experiment gone awry. Referring to the ability to collect information and identify optimal solutions for often ambiguous problems (Jonassen, Stroebel, & Lee, 2006), one stated that he needs applicants who, “know how to check things out, how to troubleshoot—that’s huge.”

**Factors shaping individual attributes.** Just as the environment and workplace situations shape cultural activity in organizations, so too does the sociocultural, economic, and physical environment impact the dispositions and competencies of individuals. Respondents discussed four distinct factors that they viewed as strong influences on individuals’ acquisition of valued competencies. I highlight two of these factors: upbringing and age.

*Upbringing.* Nine employers mentioned a person’s family, childhood, and upbringing as critical factors that shape applicants’ dispositions and skills, and that in some cases can be seen as a proxy for good cultural fit with the company. Specifically, respondents referred to “farm kids” or people having grown up in rural areas as especially attractive in terms of employability. One employer explained this line of reasoning as follows:

That little description [of a farm kid] right there probably describes the combination of attitude, problem-solving, work ethic, imagination, and innovation, better than anything that you could put into categories and test from with Rorschach plots and psychological profiles.

Thus, for some employers, applicants who grew up on a farm were considered more likely to have a strong work ethic, good problem-solving skills, and agreeable attitudes—all attributes that fit the category not only of an ideal worker, but also of some employers’ views of their own company cultures.

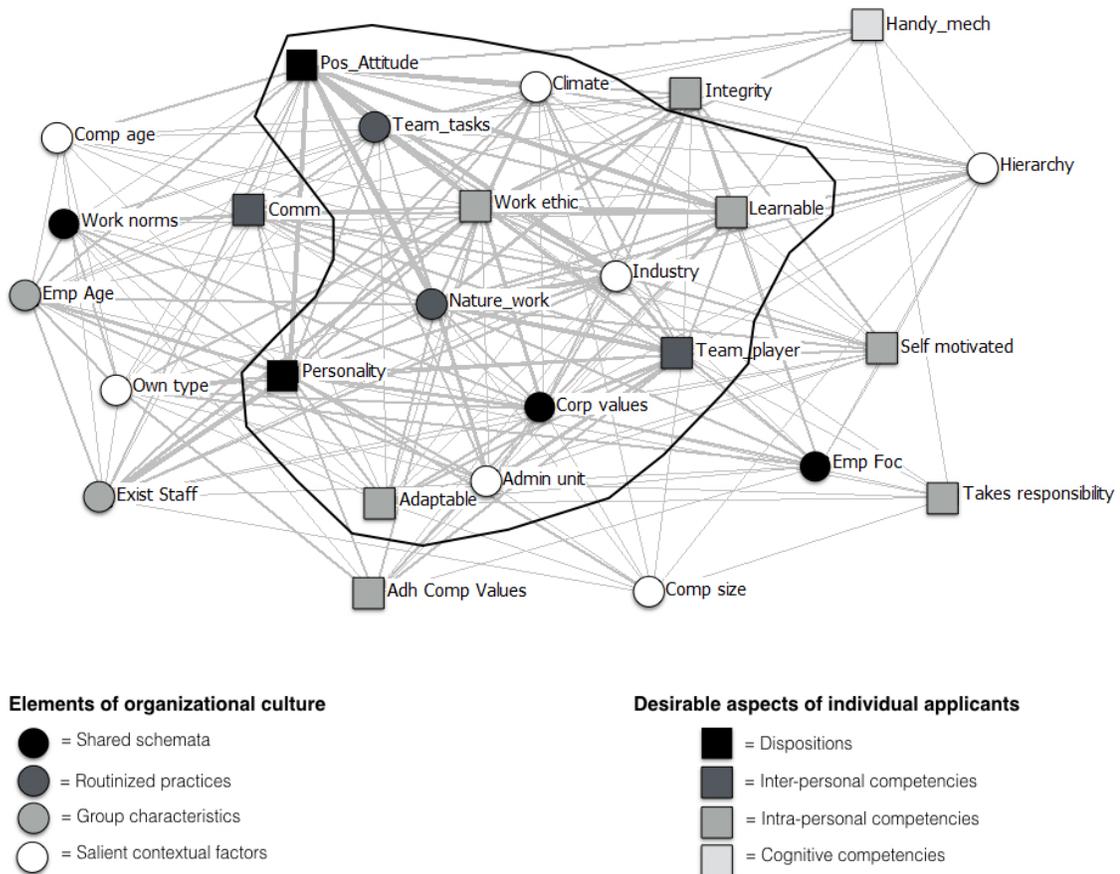
*Age.* Respondents felt that the age of applicants and employees was closely linked to their dispositions and competencies. In most cases, discussions of this point centered on generalizations that younger generations (e.g., Millennials born between 1990 and the early 2000s) had a poor work ethic and lacked patience. Specifically, several employers argued that younger employees wanted “immediate results” in terms of raises and promotions, and did not recognize that “change doesn’t happen overnight.” In other cases, respondents spoke of older workers familiar with the culture of the manufacturing industry as an asset. As one employer said about workers in their 50s who had been in the industry their entire working lives, they were leaders within the company and “it’s a little tougher to find that in the younger generation.”

#### **4. How Attributes of Organizational Culture and Applicant Attributes Are Mapped to One Another**

A central empirical question addressed in this paper is, “Which elements of the organizational culture do employers ‘match’ or associate with which attributes of individual job applicants?” As noted, I utilized social network analysis techniques to explore the underlying structure of the

interrelationships between and among codes for these two categories. The resulting graph depicts affiliations or linkages between and among pairs of codes that individual respondents reported in their interviews with respect to hiring practices (see Figure 1). The figure depicts how specific features of cultural forms within organizations (i.e., shared schemata, routinized practices, group characteristics, and salient contextual features) are associated with specific attributes of job applicants (i.e., dispositions, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive competencies).

**Figure 1.**



An affiliation graph visually depicts which code-code pairs most frequently occurred in the data by using line thickness to indicate frequency of co-occurrence. It is important to note that in the data, respondents did not necessarily make direct, causal connections between codes, but instead these data reflect instances where individuals mentioned two codes together in the context of questions about hiring practices and cultural fit. For instance, the code pairs of attitude and nature of work tasks, which are connected by a thick, dark line, were frequently (7) cited by respondents in the same interview. Based on the data, it is apparent that how elements of organizational culture and applicant attributes are related is not a matter of simple, linear relations between two ideas (e.g., shared norms and applicant personalities), but instead the relationship is far more dynamic, multivariate, and complex.

Given that one focus of this study was to identify particularly influential features of organizational cultures and applicant characteristics, an analysis of node betweenness (i.e., the number of geodesic paths passing through particular nodes) revealed that 12 particular codes were the most influential in the larger network. Codes with a high betweenness value can be considered influential because they represent nodes that are closely linked with a high number of other nodes within the network (Borgatti, 2005). In social networks these nodes may control flows of information or act as liaisons between different regions, but here they represent codes that are strongly associated with a high number of other codes (see Table 4).

A circle encompasses the codes that had betweenness scores of 4 or higher, which essentially captures those codes at the center of the graph. These data reveal how 13 specific aspects of organizational cultures and job applicants are particularly influential for this group of employers with respect to their views on the relationship between corporate culture and applicant attributes.

While combinations of codes contained in the central cluster could be interpreted in a variety of ways, I highlight the centrality of two features of the organizational culture linked to applicant attributes—industry and the nature of work. These elements refer to industry-specific tasks such as particular welding techniques, principles of computer numeric controlled programming, and other work-related activities unique to manufacturing. In addition, three contextual factors—administrative unit, industry, and climate—represent boundary conditions within which other cultural forms (e.g., nature of work, corporate values, team tasks) are enacted and connected. This suggests that the shared cognitive schemata and manufacturing-related routinized tasks within specific departments are the primary cultural phenomena to which individual applicants are matched or compared.

This finding was corroborated by observations made by several respondents regarding the importance of departments or work groups. For example, one hiring manager considers issues such as, “Is the person gonna too be quiet?” for a job in a workgroup with a boisterous group of personnel. Another respondent observed that because their company has “a strong culture” with strong-willed employees who have worked at the company for decades, when hiring she sometimes thinks that though an applicant has a good attitude and credentials she or he is not well-suited to the position because “they could just get stepped on.” Clearly, dispositional factors

**Table 4. Betweenness Scores for Individual Nodes Within the Affiliation Graph**

Node name	Betweenness
Work ethic	12.97
Corporate values	10.70
Positive attitude	9.65
Team player	8.25
Nature of work	8.16
Personality	8.01
Learnable	7.01
Administrative unit	6.80
Team tasks	6.65
Adaptable	6.07
Industry	5.96
Climate	5.36

within the firm are essential, but not in relation to individual hiring managers or a vague, unspecified “shared values,” but instead to the groups of people who work in specific departments performing specific tasks. These data provide a more fine-grained account of the role that culture plays in matching processes between applicants and organizations than previous research (e.g., Rivera, 2012). The next question is: “What are the specific procedures whereby employers match the cultural elements of their organizations to job applicants?”

## 5. Specific Processes Respondents Used to Screen Applicants and Assess Cultural Fit

Thirty-six respondents provided detailed accounts of their firm’s hiring processes that included information on the specific steps taken to screen applicants (e.g., reviewing resumes, interviewing and conducting skills tests) and the primary criteria sought during these procedures (e.g., basic employability, technical experience, personality fit, and reasoning aptitudes). These data are important to ascertain when and how cultural matching plays a role during the screening process.

**Screening applications.** Thirty respondents mentioned screening applications and/or resumes as part of their hiring procedures. During this phase of screening—which often but not always was the first step in applicant review—employers were primarily looking for three things: basic employability skills such as reliability (as evidenced by few or no gaps in work history), rudimentary grammatical skills, and even quality of handwriting; evidence of work experience or internships within the industry, which would signal that applicants had the requisite technical training; and cultural fit. In cases where applications were scrutinized to assess cultural fit, employers stated that they avoided hiring people who had worked in certain companies perceived to have toxic workplace cultures or poor reputations for craftsmanship.

**Interviews.** The next aspect of applicant screening is arguably the most important in relation to assessing cultural fit—the job interview—which is a phenomenon well established in the literature on hiring (Rivera, 2012; Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002). Forty-seven employers spoke of the interview process as the primary venue where applicants’ fit with the organizational culture was evaluated. The first use of interviewing for this purpose was to ascertain applicants’ professionalism, or their physical appearance, composure, and manners. As one employer noted, “We’ve seen people who are just absolutely perfect on paper, and they could do the job, but just not going to get along with the team [because] they were rude *throughout the interview process.*” Second, the interview was used by several employers as a way to evaluate candidates’ technical knowledge, by asking specific questions about company procedures such as laboratory protocols or welding techniques. Third, and most salient to this paper, is the fact that 22 employers used interviews to determine whether an applicant would be a good fit with the company. Some employers ask specific, culture-related questions to ensure that the issue of fit is adequately surfaced, such as asking applicants about “a list of behaviors and values that we feel make up our culture,” or asking about applicants’ experiences with group-work and team dynamics. As one manufacturing executive noted, “You can kind of sense that this person is going to fit or this person is not going to fit during the interview.” In one case,

this assessment of fit during interviews involved posing uncomfortable questions (that had been perfected in bars) to applicants to see how they would react:

And then I bring 'em up [to the office] and I say something weird just to see what they'd say, you know, and just to start off uncomfortable, and then I bring it back comfortable, just [to see how they react]. And it works, you find out who the person really is.

As this observation attests, much of this process of assessing “fit” during interviews is highly subjective. Seven employers reported asking themselves how they *feel* about the applicants throughout the interview process. One manufacturing executive observed that during and immediately after the interview he is asking himself, “Do you like that person? Do you actually like him?” Another employer stated that he asks the following questions: “Do I connect with that person? What kind of feeling do I get? Is it a warm, fuzzy feeling or is it a cold feeling?”

Finally, the interview was used by several respondents as a way to evaluate candidates' reasoning skills. One strategy was to ask applicants the same questions twice to see if their answers varied, while another involved asking multiple questions in rapid succession to see if the applicant memorized the questions and answered them in turn. Clearly, these data reveal that interview is an important tool used by employers to assess fit, but the processes of assessing the fit between applicants and organizations are highly idiosyncratic, situation-specific, and subject to the affective responses of the interviewer to the applicant's personality and performance.

**Testing and tours.** Another screening technique described by respondents was that of testing job candidates. Some tests focused on applicants' technical competencies, such as basic mathematical or spatial reasoning tests, blueprint reading exams, or on-site welding tests. Employers also used tests to assess applicants' fit with the company, including psychological tests focused on issues such as assertiveness, communication preferences, personality type, and ability to work in teams. One employer stated that they send potential hires to a local psychologist, and test results played a key role in the final decision to hire (or not). Another technique described by respondents involved taking applicants on tours of the company, which served dual roles of gauging their reactions to the job site and that of their potential colleagues to the applicant. In one case, an employer took applicants to meet staff from the department where the job opening existed, in order to give staff the opportunity to provide feedback on whether they felt the person was a good fit or not. In these cases, respondents observed that staff in these departments had “a considerable voice in hiring decisions.”

**Timing and prioritization of screening filters.** Finally, I report data regarding the first filter or criteria used in these screening procedures, which is important because a question arising from the data about screening steps is which one comes first and thus acts as the initial gatekeeping mechanism that excludes or includes applicants. Because respondents did not articulate the precise temporal order of their entire hiring process, it was not possible to report the aforementioned data with considerations of timing, yet 34 respondents provided a clear statement about which screening step came first. For 13 respondents, screening applications, resumes or curricula vitae was the first step in hiring, where work history, educational background, and

evidence of technical skills were evaluated to determine if candidates would proceed to the next stage of hiring. Three respondents utilized a math or other skills test as the first screen, to ensure that only technically qualified (and competent) applicants made it to the interview stage. For other respondents, testing for psychological or cultural fit, using temporary hiring agencies to screen out unqualified applicants, or interviews constituted the first phase of the hiring process.

For some employers hiring is a multistep process that involves evaluating different competencies using different screening techniques. One supervisor reported that he first screened resumes for work experience and credentials, followed by an interview to determine if “they have the right fit,” and then a welding test to see if they had technical skills. In this case, the technical competencies for the specific job being discussed (i.e., a welder), while important, were only salient to the hiring process after the filters of appropriate credentials, experience, and culture fit had been applied. In contrast, an executive used assessment with cultural fit as a final screen, noting that “the last segment of any hiring decision is what we’d call cultural.” These data underscore how variable hiring processes are in practice, and how the screening of applicants’ credentials or technical expertise cannot be assumed to be the first and most important determinant if they ultimately receive a job offer.

### **Discussion**

Mary, the manufacturing executive whose observation about the importance of “professional skills” opened this paper, works at a large shipbuilding firm in Wisconsin. At the time of our visit, the notion that employers had plentiful jobs but couldn’t find enough skilled applicants, largely because colleges and universities failed to prepare students with the proper skills, was regularly touted by politicians as a “skills gap” argument (Barkanic, 2016; Cappelli, 2015). With a shrug, Mary stated that she probably contributed to the situation because she wasn’t interested in hiring just a “warm body” to fill an open position. Instead, she directed her recruiters to ask of potential hires, “Are they better than 75% of the team that they’re going on?” She did this because for her, recruiting and hiring was all about “potential,” and “when we talk about potential and high performance, it’s what’s in the heart as well as the head.” And at the heart of the screening process at Mary’s firm was the job interview, where a list of behaviors and values associated with what she called “the company culture” represented the final and arguably most important gatekeeping mechanism through which job applicants had to pass in order to join the company.

This perspective and the data reported in this paper contradict the conventional wisdom regarding college student employability, which tends to be dominated by human capital arguments about the importance of schooling, credentials, and graduates’ acquisition of cognitive skills that lead directly to future wages and employability (Cappelli, 2015; Holmes, 2013). Instead, the data build upon prior work highlighting the importance of applicants’ possession (or lack thereof) of various forms of cultural capital and the degree to which individual-level cultural signals “fit” those valued by hiring managers in specific organizations (Rivera, 2012). This paper extends this literature by examining these issues in a non-elite employment context (i.e., entry-level manufacturing positions) and by exploring the precise mechanisms of the “cultural

matching” process—which heretofore had been undertheorized and underspecified with respect to the exact processes where applicants were matched to organizational contexts and cultures.

While these data do not disprove the importance that credentials, social capital, and other factors play in applicants’ getting a job offer, I argue that the current focus on credentials and the “completion agenda” distracts postsecondary researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from attention to students’ acquisition of diverse competencies in the classroom and strategies for navigating the job search process. In the remainder of this paper I examine how the data extend prior research through the central finding of hiring as a process of cultural matching to occupational communities, issues related to cultural reproduction and hiring discrimination, and implications for college students, faculty, and career services professionals.

### **New Insights into the Relationship Between Education and Employment**

Researchers in education, sociology, and labor economics have long examined the relationship between education and employment through a variety of theoretical lenses and topical foci, including the role that credentials such as degrees and certificates play in status attainment and employability (Brown & Bills, 2011; Goldin & Katz, 2007), and how social networks contribute to an individual’s access to job-related information and jobs themselves (Granovetter, 1995; Lin, 1999). Less well examined, particularly in the context of higher education and college students’ transitions to the labor market, is the issue of “fit” via the job search and hiring process. This paper builds upon research on fit (Chatman 1989; Swider, Zimmerman, & Barrick, 2015) by focusing on the cultural underpinnings of employers’ estimation of fit and what this means for higher education.

One topic addressed in the literature that is especially salient to this paper’s concern with college student employability is the empirical question of how employers or interviewers assess fit, especially which applicant attributes are being matched to which organizational attributes (i.e., the content of fit). Researchers have examined applicants’ technical competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, and abilities), personality traits, and value preferences, which were then compared to attributes of jobs (e.g., skills demands), organizations (e.g., aggregated employee values or traits), or groups (e.g., values, traits, and tasks within subunits) (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Interview research has corroborated the fact that a diverse range of applicant attributes are evaluated by firms that are then matched not only to “idiosyncratic interviewer preferences” but also firm-specific features (Cable & Judge, 1997; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). Rivera (2012) built on this work, but from a sociological and cultural perspective, concluding that interviewers in elite firms make hiring decisions by evaluating the match between the cultural signals conveyed by applicants (e.g., hobbies, personality traits) and their own experiences and preferences.

The data reported in this paper extend this line of inquiry in three distinct ways. First, this study represents one of the first examinations of cultural fit processes in non-elite firms (i.e., manufacturing companies in Wisconsin). The results suggest that while certain features of fit estimation are consistent with other occupational and industrial contexts (i.e., importance of personality, central role of the interview), the focus on intrapersonal competencies such as work

ethic and matching applicants to specific work groups may represent a different approach than in elite firms.

Second, the data provide new evidence on the processes whereby employers evaluate fit. Researchers on fit evaluations have largely agreed that the in-person job interview is the primary venue where fit or cultural matching takes place (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002; Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014), but the data indicate that interviews are not the only way that employers assessed cultural fit. Instead, employers also used skills tests, application screening, and facility tours to elicit information about applicants' dispositions and personalities to inform decisions about cultural fit. These findings extend Rivera's (2012) conclusion that interpersonal processes are at the heart of the cultural matching process. Future research should examine how different screening modalities are used to assess fit, the specific timing of fit assessments within interviews (Chuang & Sackett, 2005), and the relative value placed on different competencies throughout the hiring process (Litecky, Arnett, & Prabhakar, 2004). In addition, despite continued debates regarding the role of credentials in labor market outcomes (Brown & Bills, 2011), researchers should examine how, if at all, different types of credentials (e.g., degrees, competency-based badges) are perceived as indicators of cultural fit.

Third, this study contributes new insights into the content of cultural fit evaluations, or the types of cultural capital that employers actively consider when ascertaining fit. The evidence reported here supports the contention that a broad conception of cultural capital that includes not only highbrow markers of taste and distinction but also academic knowledge, interpersonal competencies, and personality and dispositional traits (Lareau & Weininger, 2003) best captures how employers view applicant competencies in practice. Consequently, researchers should consider how the entirety of these characteristics may act as cultural signals during the hiring process, and not only attributes commonly associated with cultural signals (e.g., hobbies). Furthermore, this study highlights the important role that institutionalized forms of cultural capital play in evaluating cultural fit, such that the process is not primarily a matter of matching attributes between individuals (i.e., applicants and evaluators), or between applicants and an ambiguous "organizational culture." In particular, institutionalized forms of cultural capital such as firm or industry standards, routines, and practices, and the organizational contexts and situations in which these manifest (e.g., departments), constitute a significant part of evaluators' constructions of the firm to which applicants are being fit.

Thus, a key contribution of this paper is the finding that hiring for this sample of Wisconsin manufacturing firms involved a matching process between individuals' cultural capital and the norms and practices salient to specific work groups, or what Van Maanen and Barley (1984) called occupational communities. The defining characteristics of such communities are that they include groups of people who view themselves as engaged in similar work, identify in a positive way with work, have a similar referent with respect to the norms and routines of their work, and have relationships that integrate leisure and the workplace. Furthermore, within these communities there exist assumptions about order, meaning, and classifications that "give rise to behavioral and cognitive diversity" between and among occupational groups (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 308), such that "work" becomes another cultural group to which an individual

may have membership in addition to her/his family, religious group, ethnic community, and so on (Lave, 1998; Strauss & Quinn, 1997). As a result, the cultural aspects of hiring that involve matching applicants to group-level phenomenon are not about fitting individuals to amorphous “organizational cultures,” but instead to specific “cognitive, social, and moral contours of [an] occupation” such as the welders, machinists, and computer numeric controlled machine operators in Mary’s firm in northern Wisconsin (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 292).

### **Hiring as Cultural Gatekeeping: Prospects for Exclusion and Discrimination**

Another implication of cultural matching is the potential for hiring discrimination and the exclusion of applicants who are dissimilar from existing occupational communities. A central idea in Bourdieu’s (1986) relational sociology is that dominant classes effectively reproduce inequality through excluding those without the requisite capital from obtaining positions of power or prestige. At the institutional level, whether it be a firm or a public university, this exclusion happens when an individual’s cultural resources do not meet the standards or expectations of the institution (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Thus, where a disjuncture between a firm’s expectations and an applicant’s cultural resources exist—whether on the basis of her/his personality, interpersonal competencies, or appearance—a person could be excluded from the labor market.

For college students who grapple with the rising price tag of a postsecondary education, tens of thousands of dollars of debt, and challenges meeting basic needs such as housing and food security, securing a job during and especially after college is critical (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). While our research did not reveal explicit instances of hiring discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation or any other personal attribute, the prevalence of cultural fit should give one pause. At the least, the reification of “farm kids,” the explicit exclusion of hiring applicants who live far away from facilities, and the preference for hiring applicants who match the personalities and predilections (e.g., hobbies) of current employees raises the prospect that cultural matching could introduce discrimination into the hiring process. Whether encoded in policy or in the eyes of individual interviewers, a focus on cultural fit effectively introduces the likelihood that applicants will be excluded on the basis of attributes other than skill, merit, and educational accomplishments.

Given considerable evidence that hiring discrimination on the basis of race, class, and gender continues to be a problem in the U.S. labor market (Purkiss, et al., 2006; Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017), and members of underrepresented groups have adopted coping mechanisms such as “whitening” resumes by removing racial markers (Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016), mechanisms underlying the processes whereby discrimination occurs should be unmasked. One area that should be scrutinized is the training and certification that human resources professionals must undergo in relation to issues of bias and discrimination. While most human resources programs require coursework in legal issues, of which Title VII is one, it is unclear how deeply these courses delve into implicit bias and the dangers of hiring for cultural fit. Some also argue for increased awareness around discrimination and bias to be addressed through corporate diversity policies (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006), but courses that heighten

awareness may not be sufficient. In contexts in which people are led to feel that they are acting in an unbiased, fair, or objective manner, they are more likely to behave in biased ways (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007; Castilla, 2008). In any case, policymakers and administrators of human resources programs need to pay careful attention to this issue of implicit bias impacting the hiring process through cultural matching.

### **Implications for College Students, Faculty, and Career Advisors**

The fact that employers regularly hire for cultural fit and not just on the basis of educational credentials and technical expertise has important implications for students who are in the midst of their college or university experience or are about to enter the job market. In addition, these findings implicate the work of faculty and career advisors and how they approach students' skill development and advising. Ultimately, while some structural forces of cultural reproduction and inequality may be beyond the control or influence of higher education professionals, several things can and must be done, particularly for students of color, first-generation students, and others whose dispositions, appearances, and cultural signals may not align with those of the dominant culture and those making hiring decisions.

**What College Students Can Do.** To be competitive in the labor market, students will need to not only acquire technical competencies in their chosen field but also a diverse range of inter- and intrapersonal competencies that can transfer to the workplace (Deming, 2017; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). However, it will not be sufficient for students to acquire an arsenal of these varied competencies alone, which some have recommended so that students can utilize an "expansive cultural toolkit" to establish similarities with interviewers (Rivera, 2012, p. 1017). Instead, students are well-advised to proactively cultivate their professional networks, acquire workplace experience via co-op programs or internship experiences, and avail themselves of resume review and mock interviews at campus career services. Furthermore, research has shown that students of color that develop strong and positive identities with their racial and ethnic heritage are better prepared for career-related challenges (e.g., discrimination) (Byars-Winston, 2010). While such identity development may not protect a student from hiring discrimination, the literature suggests that embracing and clarifying one's identity may help students cope with these situations.

**What Faculty Can Do.** Faculty are experts in their disciplinary communities, from their graduate training and socialization into the ways of solving problems, interacting with one another, handling specific tools and artifacts, and habits of mind unique to a professional community. Thus, they are in a position to explicitly cultivate in their students a facility for working with these cultural tools of a profession or occupational community, which is a point of entree into the workplace. However, this cultural transmission does not happen simply by being present in a lecture hall; these competencies and aptitudes should be explicitly linked to workplace settings, a pedagogical move that has the added benefit of enhancing learning through embedding tasks in authentic situations (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Jonassen, Strobel, & Lee, 2006). In addition, faculty with contacts in industry, which is not unusual in community and technical colleges and in professional fields such as engineering or nursing, can help disrupt the reproduction of inequality and discriminatory hiring practices in two ways: by voicing their

opposition to hiring practices that effectively exclude graduates who do not look, act, or think like incumbent staff, and by honestly discussing hiring discrimination with their students, which will enhance student awareness of these practices and potentially impact those who will be in positions of authority in the future.

**What Career Services Professionals Can Do.** Career services offices at colleges and universities should amend existing programs on resume development and mock interviewing with workshops on how students can navigate the cultural aspects of the job search. This training could focus on how to deal with cultural or behavioral questions during interviews, but also preparation in how to think about and “read” workplace cultures. Consequently, teaching students how to interpret job announcements and company websites for cues about cultural predilections would be especially useful.

Essentially, college students need to be informed about the cultural nature of hiring, especially the likelihood that discrimination on the basis of gender, class, and race will be encountered by many graduates. This can be a simple matter of raising awareness of the issue, but career advisors should also facilitate students’ development of racial and ethnic self-concept, which “may serve as a protective factor against potentially deleterious contextual experiences such as racial discrimination by enhancing coping efficacy” (Byars-Winston, 2010, p. 451).

Given the continued presence of these gatekeeping mechanisms in the labor market, it is essential to expand our views of the college-to-work pathway to include a more critical and nuanced conception of the hiring process. Otherwise, students, career advisors and policymakers may operate under the incorrect assumption that what one needs to get a job is the “right” set of credentials and a decent interview performance. The evidence suggests that entry into the workforce may not be so simple, and instead may be a process whereby subcultures restrict entry to newcomers based on their not looking, acting, and thinking like incumbents.

With careful attention to cultivating students’ competencies, identities, and savvy for navigating the cultural nature of the job search process, postsecondary faculty and advisors may be able to play a role in interrupting these cycles of inequality and exclusion.

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