Concepts of Organizational Culture and Presumed Links to Efficiency

Mats Alvesson

This paper provides a critical survey of some common conceptualizations of organizational culture: culture as a building block In organizational design, as the outcome of symbolic management, as a diagnostic instrument and as a paradigmatic concept. A number of well-known proponents for various views on organizational culture are critically examined, especially concerning assumptions and hypotheses on the relationship between organizational culture and various performance-related outcomes. It is argued that many writers exaggerate the central role played by croporate culture as an independent variable affecting organizational efficiency. Part of the problem is establishing the linkages between culture and other organizational phenomena and outcomes is concerned with difficulties in separating culture from non-culture. Efforts to establish outcomes of corporate culture often become unclear, speculative or tautological. The paper concludes that even though it is understandable that scholars for technical and pragmatic reasons emphasize culture as a key to organizational performance and then 'narrow down' culture to a variable or factor, this reductionistic view on culture is unfruitful. A broader view, conceptualizing culture as a metaphor for organization appears much more promising.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980's many efforts were made to define and understand the somewhat elusive phenomenon called 'organizational culture' and its implications for organizational performance. The majority of these studies have proposed that the culture of organizations is closely linked to a large number of Intermediary and outcome variables, causing or having conse-quences for the performance of organizations. Among the proposed key dimensions of organizational efficiency and effectiveness, presumably closely linked to corporate culture, we find everything from corporate strategy and success/failure of mergers and acquisitions, implementation of new technology and organizational learning to ineffective communication, socialization processes and outcomes, leadership, employees' commitment, motivation and satisfaction at the workplace.

At the same time, there exists a broad spectrum of ways in which the concept of culture is used In management and organization theory [1, 3, 26, 28]. Organizational culture scholars take different positions on a number of key dimensions. Culture can be — and sometimes is — used in a way which comprises everything and, thus, nothing. Many authors, however, treat the concept in a more precise way. The links between organizational culture and various organizational structures, processes and outcomes of relevance for organizational performance are, of course, entirely dependent on the definition of organizational culture.

The purpose of this paper is to indicate some common ways of using the concept of organizational culture and critically examine assumptions and propositions about how culture affects organizational efficiency.

BASIC AND INSTRUMENTAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CULTURE

Before consideringf different definitions of the culture concept, I shall refer to a distinction between a basic view on culture and an instrumental conceptualization of it [30, 38]. I see these views as extremes on a continuum. At one extreme, the scope, the wholeness, the depth and the complexity of culture are included. At the other, instrumental extreme, the concept Is 'narrowed down' so that in practice it

refers to something not too complex. The parts of culture which are supposed to be less relevant from an instrumental point of view are excluded, either because of their irrelevance for achieving objectives (like cultural codes concerning gender, kinship, religion, sexuality, eating habits, etc). or the impossibilities in affecting these (such as the culture of the nation or late-capitalistic/post-industrial society).

What is asserted here is that current debates on whether culture is manageable or not, or whether it could (or should) be the target for planned change or not, is in some regards quite unfruitful, if the debates are understood as debates on the objective nature of corporate reality. My impression is that, regretfully, it is often so. My answer to the questions of whether culture could and should be managed, changed, planned, controlled etc., depends to a large extent on the scope and depth of definitions [16]. If one highlights the surface and most instrumentally relevant parts of a culture (i.e. behavioural norms for achievements at the workplace), it is then likely that clever managers and consultants can manage to change these parts of culture.

A BRIEF SURVEY OF CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CULTURE

Contemporary literature on the relevance of organizational culture for corporate performance might be categorized into certain typical positions. These might be located on a continuum of instrumental/basic views. Of course, this dimension highlights only one aspect of differences in conceptualization of culture, although in the present context an important one. Other differences are discussed later. I start with the most instrumentally oriented position and then move to more academic/intellectual formulations of culture.

(1) Culture as a building block in organizational design

Culture is seen here as a subsystem of organizations including norms, values, beliefs and behavioural styles of the employees, well demarcated from other parts of organization. It is thus a behaviour regulation force. Even though culture is difficult to master and design in an optimum way, it is in principle not different from other organizational elements in terms of management and control. 'Cultural engineering' is a concept which catches the spirit of this position. It is sometimes referred to as "the corporate culture school" [8, 9, 12, 31].

(2) Symbolic management

Here, leaders in organizations are presumed to have influence on how employees perceive and understand reality and their tasks at the workplace through highlighting some aspects of organizational reality, creating and maintaining the metaphors and myths through which this is understood and managing the symbols and symbolic patterns characterizing organizations and affecting individuals. This influence affects the meaning and understanding of situations, structures, tasks, etc, and might lead to a 'favourable' (from top management's point of view), definition of organizational reality and work, shared by the entire organizational collective [5, 21, 29]

(3) Culture as a diagnostic instrument

This view of organizational culture stresses the deep values and basic assumptions of organizations in terms of half-conscious beliefs and ideals about objectives, relationship to the external world, internal relations that lie behind behavioural norms, action rules and priorities and other 'artifacts'. Due to its depth, culture is viewed as hard to be fully aware of, difficult to have a far-reaching influence on and, even more so to change. It is assumed that only occasionally culture, or parts of it, can be managed. Efforts in those regards are always circumscribed by great uncertainty. The pragmatic usage of the culture concept in organization is basically a diagnostic one. Awareness of the cultural aspects of organizations is beneficial for greater insight concerning most key aspects of organizations [14, 16, 25].

(4) Culture as a paradigmatic concept

This perspective produces a more independent conceptualization of organizational culture in relationship to pragmatic interests. Culture is an overall term for approaches which investigate the cultural aspects of organizations. Cul-

ture is thus not a substantial object as much as a theoretical approach about how to get a deep and rich understanding about organizations [7, 11, 18, 26, 35]. Proponents of this position, rarely try to determine how organizational culture does affect organizational performances. Authors from the other three positions often do.

CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

I shall now critically examine some examples of the first three positions mentioned above, especially ideas on how organizational culture affects effectiveness. I choose to treat a few texts in some depth rather than discuss a larger number of publications superficially. The texts chosen are, I think, rather typical and written by the well-known authors. Kilmann, Pfeffer, Schein and Louis [12, 15, 16, 21, 22, 25]. Emphasis is given to the academically oriented literature, here represented by Pfeffer, Schein and Louis, while the very pragmatic approach of Kilmann and other corporate culture authors is given attention here primarily because they represent the majority of those writing about this topic.

One reason for discussing texts by Pfeffer, Schein and Louis is their clear statements on the effects of culture on organizational performance. Statements of this type are not as common as might be expected in that type of literature. In most analyses and discussions, the relevance of cultural matters for organizational performance is clearly indicated, but explicit statements of links between culture and effectiveness-related outcomes are relatively uncommon.

CULTURE AS BEHAVIOUR-REGULATOR

As an example of an author treating culture as a 'building block' in organizational design or a behaviour-regulating force, I will treat Kilmann who recognizes that there is much disagreement about what culture is, but suggests that this does not matter [12, p. 352]. He makes no effort to provide a precise definition but concludes that:

"Even if we accept the idea that the term culture will always be a bit vague and ill defined, unlike the more superficial and tangible aspects of or-

ganizations, it is still important to consider what makes a culture good or bad, adaptive or dysfunctional." [12, p. 354]

Even though it is unclear what a culture is, to Kilmann it is easy to talk about this ambiguous phenomenon in terms of 'right' or 'wrong', 'adaptive', or 'dysfunctional'. Culture governs people's behaviour, either in the right or the wrong direction, he says. Culture is described almost as a physical force, at least the words used are to a large extent metaphors drawn from physics. It is said, for example, that

"Culture provides meaning, direction, and mobilization — it is the social energy that moves the corporation into allocation... the energy that flows from shared commitments among group members..." [12, p. 352]

and

"The force controlling behaviour at every level in the organization..." (p. 358)

Kilmann states that every firm has a separate and distinct culture, that it can develop and change quickly and that it can and must be managed and controlled.

"If left alone, a culture eventually becomes dysfunctional" [12, p. 354]

To an academically oriented reader, this view of culture, appears to be oversimplified, unprecise, reductionistic and reified. It is not my purpose here, however, to criticize this conceptualization of culture, but to examine the stated links between it and corporate performance.

The crucial dimension of culture, according to Kilmann, is the norms. Here culture is "most easily controlled". More precisely, it is the norms that guide the behaviour and attitudes of people in the company, and that is of greatest interest and significance. The norms prevailing in the organization then have a forceful effect on what is required for organizational success, quality, efficiency, product reliability, customer service, innovation, hard work, loyalty etc.

If the norms are 'strong' enough among workers and managers, concerning the appropriateness of hard work, loyalty to the company and giving priority to the means/objectives presumed to be of greatest importance for company effectiveness, then culture improves effectiveness: Behavioural norms have an impact on people's behaviour and people's behaviour affects company performance.

These simple ways of reasoning normally contain the following elements:

$$\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{The direction of} \\ \text{values and norms} \end{array}\right) \times (\text{Their strength})$$

$$-\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{The efforts and} \\ \text{priorities of the employees} \end{array}\right)$$

This is the core in most (American) texts on corporate culture [9, 20, 24]. There are, of course, many difficulties in this model. Consider the following statement: "The strength of a culture influences the intensity of behaviour" [24, p. 236]. The strength of a culture, according to Sathe [24], is determined by "how many important shared assumptions there are", how widely they are shared in the corporation and how clearly they are ordered in terms of their relative importance.

A 'strong' culture is thus characterized by homogeneity of a collective, i.e. everybody assumes the same things, and assumptions can be clearly ordered. A problem here is that in a 'complex' culture — and I guess all are — assumptions are not that easy to count and order. To say that cultures could be measured along a single-dimensional scale of 'strength' reflects an oversimplified and reified approach.

The quantifying statement that "the strength of a culture influences the intensity of behaviour" makes little sense. It is of course not so that the 'stronger' culture the more behaviour. A 'strong' or distinct culture might indicate conformism or pluralism, action orientation or introspection and reflection. The idea of culture as, in the best case, a potent fuel for active behaviour, is a widespread as it is questionable in current writings on organizational culture.

Another problem is the tendency to view the norms/values as something that can be treated in isolation [9, 12, 24]. Corporate culture authors [9, 12, 24] propose that norms/values can variate quite freely, be affected and cause behaviour and performance. This 'abstract' conceptualization of norms/values as an independent variable is problematical. Job norms are probably closely tied to a number of other circumstances and dimensions at the workplace, e.g. organizational structure and work organizations, supervision, kind of job, reward systems, the employees' age, qualifications and perceived self-interests. To try to single out and isolate throughout the organization shared norms/values as a separate causal factor be-

hind the efforts and work performances of the employees is a peculiar enterprise. This does not mean that social norms in corporations are unimportant. But to a large degree these are probably held by different groups in companies to different degrees and with different content. At the shopfloor, output restriction is a common norm, for example. This is probably seldon shared by top management. There are a large number of norm-sources in complex organizations, making those strongly held and shared by the whole organization few [35]. And those (behavioural) norms which actually have a really broad impact in the organization are in most cases contingent on other factors (work tasks, organizational structure etc).

If people working as a CEO, typist, factory worker, salesman, engineer and product designer shared the same norms and acted upon them in a similar way, the result would probably be grotesque. Division of labour is a cornerstone in modern corporations and if corporate norms should oppose that rather than reflect diversity, efficiency would not be helped. It is sometimes argued that a 'corporate culture' counteracts disintegration caused by the vertical and horizontal differentiation in modern organizations. But to the extent that this is the case, this is probably less achieved through the norms of corporate culture directly affecting behaviour in a homogenous way, than by feelings of community. We must distinguish between a common culture as a source of feelings of togetherness and mutual understanding, and as a determinant of overt behaviour.

Consequently the values and norms comprising the corporate culture do only to a very small degree have an impact of its own on organizational effectiveness in terms of how it affects people's work behaviour and willingness to work.

MANAGEMENT AS SYMBOLIC ACTION AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Many writers emphasing the role of symbols and symbolic behaviour in management do not explicitly talk so much about organizational culture. In many cases, however, their approach is very similar to that of culture writers. Pfeffer [21], for example, talks about the importance of "a common set of understandings about the organization and its environment" and of "or-

ganizations as systems of shared meanings". He uses the metaphor "paradigm" instead of culture.

Many assume that material, action and verbal symbols give a deeper meaning to individuals and affect them beneath the fully conscious and include the affective-expressive dimension. Most authors stress that this might bring along high commitment. Metaphors, myths, rites, ceremonies etc. are the symbols most often mentioned and these are assumed to be possible tools for managers [14, 23, 32, 33]. In order to function as a myth, rite or ceremony (at least with any significance) the collective involved must 'pick up' a story or a behaviour pattern, give it meaning and significance. It must also attain the historical durability that characterizes myths and, although to a lesser degree, rites.

Pfeffer [21] talks about management as primarily symbolic action. Pfeffer suggests that constraints outside managerial control basically determine managerial action and that, consequently, management has very little significance concerning "substantial outcomes", i.e. budgets, sales, profits and other things with physical referents. The constraints mean that organizations are externally controlled by market conditions and other forms of resource dependences (cf. [22]). Management might, however, have a far reaching impact on the employees' view on and attitude to social reality, ie.g. the "symbolic outcomes" — attitudes, values and perceptions.

> "The argument is that management action operates largely with and on symbolic outcomes, and that external constraints affect primarily substantive actions and outcomes in formal organizations." [21, p. 6]

The symbolic outcomes of managerial action increase the probability that a common set of understandings is being developed among the organizational members. They are bound together by shared meanings and a common perception. Managerial action — and 'culture' (even though Pfeffer does not explicitly use that concept) — involve the development of a social consensus around those labels and the definition of activity [21, p. 21]

A clever usage of symbolic action might partly replace "substance" in an ambiguous situation and thus increase the satisfaction felt by a group:

> "Symbolic actions may serve to modify groups that are dissatisfied with the organization, there-

by ensuring their continued support of the organization and the lessening of opposition and conflict." [21, p. 35]

Symbolic action might also produce commitment and identification with the company but the behavioural consequences of this is rather uncertain. Efforts and performances may depend on other factors than the attitudes of the employees.

Pfeffer is thus much more careful than most writers on corporate culture in his postulations of the causal relations between culture and various dimensions of corporate performance. The emphasis is rather on the avoidance of problems which might affect performances negatively, such as conflicts, resistance, widespread frustration, high turnover and absence etc., than on positive effects in terms of what might be achieved.

Some scepticism towards Pfeffer's formulations appears to be motivated, although I find his text relatively free from the tendency to give 'culture' an all embracing potentiality that marks the corporate culture authors. The effects he talks about are a product of (managerial) action. Firstly, there is an idealistic bias giving primacy to the short-term social processes governing the perception of social reality. 'Reality' does certainly not present itself to people so that it is simply mirrored in their minds. Perceptual, cognitive and social processes intervene. But these social sources are also governned by 'reality'. In other words, the substantial parts of a group's job situation have symbolic consequences [2]. Pfeffer refers to Berger and Luckmann's [6] concept of the social construction of social reality, but plays down the historical dimension behind this process. The world view and patterns of social perception are historically anchored, which make perceptions, attitudes and sentiments difficult to affect in many situations. Secondly, the multiplicity of sources behind the socially governed perceptions and understandings of organizational affairs, including sources of conflict, is played down by Pfeffer [21]. The multiplicity of professions and occupations in most complex organizations might create social conflicts and competitive definitions of reality [35]. Pfeffer talks about organizations as paradigms. A more appropriate metaphor might be to see most organizations as "preparadigmatic fields of knowledge", where several groups within themselves have shared perceptions and understandings but where intergroup relations often

are of a kind which does not facilitate cooperation and harmony. (Pfeffer is, however, aware that paradigms might correspond to groups in organizations and not necessarily to organizations in their wholes.)

The objections presented here, however, do not aim to deny that managerial action may influence the organization (its members) through actions which effect how reality is perceived rather than reality in itself, in a way that leads to shared perceptions and understandings. This might be a stabilizing force, counteracting conflicts about technologies and negative evaluations of ambiguous situations and conditions.

CULTURE AS BASIC ASSUMPTION AND VALUES

In this and the following section, I shall discuss two examples of conceptualizations of organizational culture which emphasize its depth and broadness in terms of meaning/consciousness and the more or less restricted possibilities of managing and controlling it, but still talk about clear culture/performance connections. Schein's [25] definition of culture emphasizes the deeper levels. To him, culture is

">... a pattern of basic assumptions-invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." [25, p. 9]

Schein defines basic assumptions as something that has become so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a cultural unit. If a basic assumption is strongly held in a group, members would find behaviour based on any other premise inconceivable. Schein also relates the culture concept to two other levels: values and artifacts. Artifacts are the visible and audible patterns of the culture, existing on a surface level. Values are at the intermediary level, concerns what 'ought' to be and to be done. They are more or less understood and consciously grasped by the organizational community.

Schein suggests that cultural phenomena have far reaching effects on organizational effectiveness and individual satisfaction. As examples he mentions and tries to illustrate the effects of culture on strategy, failures of merg-

ers, acquisitions and diversifications, failure to integrate new technologies, integroup conflicts within the organization, ineffective meetings and communication breakdowns, socialization failures and productivity.

A careful reading of Schein's efforts to show and illustrate the effects of culture raises doubts as to the causal relationship presumed by him. One example indicating the effect of culture on strategy provided by Schein concems a company that grew up and became successful by marketing a very complex product to sophisticated consumers.

"When the company later developed smaller, simpler, less expensive versions of this product, which could be sold to less sophisticated customers, its product designers and its marketing and sales divisions could not deal with the new customer type. The sales and marketing people could not imagine what the concerns of the new, less knowledgeable customer might be, and the product designers continued to be convinced that they could judge product attractiveness themselves. Neither group was motivated to understand the new customer type because, unconsciously, they tended to look down on such customers." [25, p. 32]

He suggests that this problem was not merely one of inadequate training but of a 'cultural' type "because the perceptions and resulting behaviour patterns were based on deeply held, long-standing assumptions that were taken for granted because they had led to prior success".

This "deeply held, long-standing assumption" presumably had been that the company manufactures and sells a complex product to sophisticated customers. Apparently, large groups of the organization did not share this assumption, while in fact the development, production and marketing of a simpler version of the product for a less sophisticated consumer group actually took place. It might be argued that some groups did take this assumption for granted while others did not. But when top management and much of what is actually being done in the organization really overcomes this assumption it is difficult to see how people can stick to it. Of course, they can be against the change, have low opinions about a certain type of customer, less knowledge about how to deal with things, etc., but this does not really dig into the deep level which Schein sees as the crucial one.

From Schein's description it appears that inability to understand and judge the concerns and tastes of the customers was the crucial

problem. It is an unnecessary speculation to bring the basic assumptions into the picture. If a person works for some time with a particular object, competence, not only in a strict technical sense, but also in a wider social or cultural one, is developed in line with the demands of the particular object. A wide range of capacities in terms of technical problem solving, communications, interpersonnel skills etc. are involved. Some of this might be said to be of a 'cultural' type, but hardly in the way Schein conceptualizes the matter, i.e. values and basic assumptions.

A second example within a similar area concerns a large packaged-foods company which purchased a chain of hamburger restaurants. While many of the managers of these restaurants left because they did not approve of the philosophy of the new parent company, new people from the latter were bought in to replace them. This was a mistake because they did not understand the technology of the fast food business. Problems of understanding the acquired company ultimately led to the company selling the restaurant chain, having lost a lot of money on it. Also here, it is difficult to see the specific importance of culture, at least in Schein's sense. Lack of knowledge of the business and wrong management style certainly involve many other aspects than culture.

A very different type of effect of culture, according to Schein, concerns productivity. Referring to some studies, he writes that

">... work groups form strong cultures and often such subcultures, develop the assumption that work should be limited not by what one is able to do but what is appropriate to do — 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. Sometimes, when the organization is seen to be in trouble or when workers link their own selfinterest to that of the company the norm is toward high productivity, but typically the norm restrict output." [25, p.43]

Also in this case, Schein's concept of culture hardly explains the outcome (a certain degree of productivity). It is a long step from basic assumption and deep values to the behavioural norms on a fair performance. The 'organizational cultural' content of these norms is quite limited. As Schein indicates, they vary in relation to circumstances, such as economic situation, risks for lay-offs etc. Thus the norms are contingent on non-cultural factors.

My point here is not to indicate the irrelevance of the culture concept for various dimensions and outcomes in organizations. In one or two of all his cases, Schein's concept of culture appears to fit into what he tries to explaind and illustrate (e.g. integroup conflicts). But in most of his cases, as I have tried to show above, there are problems of making a clear linkage between culture and organizational effectiveness.

OUTCOMES OF WORKPLACE CULTURE

In a survey article on how to investigate workplace cultures Louis [16] characterizes culture as

"A set of understandings or meanings shared by a group of people. The meanings are largely tacit among members, and clearly relevant to the particular group, and are distinctive to the group. Meanings are passed on to new group members... the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, a style of social and artistic expression, a set of common understandings." [16(6), p. 74]

Louis mentions four examples of outcomes, effects and functions of workplace culture, more or less closely related to effectiveness variables. One is team-oriented work in coal mines (documented by Trist and Bamforth [34]), which increased safety and meaningfulness of going to work. A second is that workplace cultures have been shown to affect workers' commitment to, and identification with, the group and organization. Louis [16] also says that cultures bring about "lack of a need for structural controls to induce desired attitudes and behaviour when strong cultures are operative". It also facilitates the socialization of new members.

The behaviour-regulating possibilities of culture were treated above in relationship to the values/norms view on culture of Kilmann and other corporate culture writers. I shall also revert to this issue. To some extent the sceptical comments made earlier in the article also hold true here. However, Louis uses a partly different definition of culture. To her it is meanings/understandings and "socially transmitted behaviour patterns" that are the content of culture. This is somewhat different from values and norms. A problem here is that it is difficult to soo see how culture and the outcomes of culture might be separated. If culture *is* meanings and socially transmitted behaviour patterns, how can it then (if it is 'strong') *induce* attitudes and behaviours (and replace structural con-

trols)? Also the other efforts of Louis to link cul-
ture with its outcomes are partly tautological.
That work was carried out on a team-managed
basis in the coal mines is not an *effect* of the
culture there. It is more appropriate to say that
the opposite is the case — that the work situa-
tion and the group-oriented way of doing the job
lead to a certain culture. Or, even better, to say
that the workplace culture cannot be separat-
ed from the way the job was carried out. The
workplace culture *is* a way of doing the job.

The same problem yields for the statement
that "the socialization of new members is facili-
tated by work group cultures" [16, p. 85]. It is
so by definition. Without culture, no socializa-
tion is possible and without socialization there
wold not be anyone to 'carry' the culture. (The
same remark might be made against Schein
[25], who also argues as if culture and sociali-
zation are in an external relation to each other.)

That workplace cultures should affect work-
ers' commitment to, and identification with, the
group and organization, is also a statement not
free from tautology. Culture includes a certain
similarity among people involved, and identifi-
cation and similarity go together. That work-
place culture affects commitment and identifi-
cation with the workplace makes some sense;
however, Louis also mentions that the coal
mine safety was facilitated and families of work
groups members were taken care of, and this
might be seen as (distinct) outcome of work-
place culture.

The general impression from considering
Louis' short account of "outcomes of work-
place culture" [16] is that there are considera-
ble problems in establishing a separation of
what belongs to culture and to outcomes. The
definition of culture includes most of what are
presented as outcomes of culture.

DISCUSSION

A problem for the culture concept in or-
ganizational studies, at least for those with
pragmatic/instrumental purposes, is to give it
a restricted and precise meaning. A look at the
current ways of defining culture indicates that
an aggregated list of definitions of culture
leaves hardly anything of what is thought, felt,
intended or done in organizations outside "cul-
ture". Some common ways of defining culture
are:

— Observed behavioural regularities or "the
way we do things" in a particular corpora-
tion [9].
— A set of behavioural norms characterizing
a company [12].
— "A cognitive frame of reference and a pat-
tern of behaviour transmitted to members of
a group from the previous generation of the
group" (Beres and Porterwood, [17, p. 171],
cf. also Louis [16] above).
— "Shared social knowledge" [36].
— "... what people believe about what works
and what does not" [37].
— "... the set of important assumptions
(often unstated) that members of a commu-
nity held in common" [24, p. 235].
— "... a shared system of values, norms and
symbols" [15, p. 249].
— "... the organization's expressive and af-
fective dimensions in a system of shared
and meaningful symbols" [1, p. 107].

These definitions include people's behaviour,
norms, cognitions, knowledge, beliefs, assump-
tions, values, symbols and emotions. Not much
is left. Some authors propose a view of culture
which include most of these aspects.

"Culture can be defined as the shared
philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, be-
liefs, expectations, attitudes and norms that knit
a community together." [13, p. 5]

Given all that appears to be contained by the
culture concept, its relevance for various
dimensions of organizational effectiveness as
well as most other aspects of organizations is
great. The popularity of corporate culture as a
tool for management is then understandable,
although the popularity is probably partly due
to difficulties in giving culture a clear and dis-
tinct meaning.

In terms of the relevance of organizational
culture for organizational effectiveness, the cul-
ture idea quite often promises more than it
stands for. I am not saying that there are no
connections between culture and effective-
ness. On a general level there certainly is. Cul-
ture might actually be connected to everything.
The issue discussed here, however, concerns
connections between specific culture concepts
and outcomes. Some influence on attitudes,
feelings of satisfaction (or reduction of feelings
of frustration), conflict level, commitment and
identification with the workplace might also
come from 'culture', although what is being
produced by the latter as an abstracted deter-
minant might not be so significant.

The examination of propositions of how relatively precisely defined concepts of culture bring about distinct outcomes suggests that these propositions are more often problematic. The efforts to isolate organizational culture as a separate factor, having significance in itself, and then show its effects on a number of variables do often not succeed. Either the causal link appears as speculative and uncertain or the separation between culture and its outcomes fails. Only in a minor number of cases, behavioural and other "substantial" outcomes of culture (given the definitions used by the various authors) do not seem to be speculative, exaggerated or tautological. Of the four examples treated above (corporate culture, Pfeffer, Schein and Louis) it is primarily Pfeffer's somewhat more cautious formulation of the possible consequences of symbolic action on attitudes and other "non-substantial" aspects in organizations which seems to be well-founded.

A part of the problem of talking about the consequences of culture for organizational performance and other outcomes has to do with difficulties in separating culture and non-culture. If culture affects something, then this something, in order to make sense, must be "outside culture" (as a logical category). This means of course also that culture must be understood as distinct from the social phenomena it affects. Otherwise, we have a tautology. Tautological statements are, however, common when organizational culture authors try to establish positive effects of culture. I have pointed ed above at the relation between culture and socialization, where both Schein and Louis say that culture affects/facilities socialization. As said, this does not make sense while culture is the content of socialization and socialization is the reproduction of culture.

Another common problem is many organizational culture authors' efforts to view culture in organization as something distinct and external to bureaucracy and formal/structural control (cf. Louis [16] above). Wilkins and Ouchi [36], for example, see bureaucracy and culture as alternative organizational forms. It might, however, be argued that formalization of tasks, hierarchical structure and working by the book is not "less culture" than anything else. Bureaucracy, in the rational, Weberian sense of the concept might be seen as a most typical cultural phenomenon of modern organizations. (If a non-materialistic, i.e. ideational, view on culture is preferred, it is the ideological and cognitive aspects — bureaucracy as a way of thinking/problem solving — which appear as key cultural features of most organizations). Many organizational culture authors, guided by a technical interest in knowledge, do not notice this in their preoccupation in narrowing down culture to a management tool, complementing those traditionally recognized, such as structural arrangements.

CONCLUSION

The critical comments made express scepticism to the conceptualization of culture as a subsystem of organizations, as a demarcable part of organizations which is seen as distinct from, and external to, social processes, variables and outcomes in organizations. Conceptualizations, which indicates that culture affects specific outcomes, e.g. efficiency and performance, are often problematical.

A major difficulty concerns the possibility in clearly distinguishing between content and outcomes of culture. Confusions are here common, authors suggesting that culture produces what it per definition is. A similar problem is raised by Pennings and Gresov, who also point to the difficulties in isolating values and norms and estimate their causal importance:

> "... the deterministic weight to be assigned to cultural factors is highly problematic. In assessing, for instance, the extent to which value determine behaviour, the best evidence for what values exist often lies in norms. But the existence of a norm is usually evidenced by regularities of behaviour and hence the whole explanation becomes tautological." [19, p. 323]

The discussion in this paper gives support for the idea of conceptualizing culture in a wider way than just a "subsystem" of an organization. Viewing culture as a metaphor for organizations or as a paradigm (umbrella concept) for research then appears as more reasonable [18, 26—28]. This approach avoids the problems of making distinctions between the cultural subsystem and other types of social phenomena and outcomes in organizations. This conceptualization means that causal relationship betwen culture and other variables are not meaningful to try to establish. Instead of being treated as an isolated, dependent or independent variable, culture is a dimension penetrating all sectors of organizational life. Culture then is viewed as the symbols and meanings shared by a group (cf. [10]).

The metaphorical use of the culture concept, of course, does not lack limitations. One is restricted practical relevance. A culture in this sense can hardly be managed, controlled or intentionally changed: at best it might be marginally affected through purposive activity. A second is a risk of an idealistic bias, when all organizational matters primarily become treated as cultural issues. (Of course, it is possible to use a materialistic concept of culture, but this is not so popular among organizational culture writers [2].) Still, the analysis conducted in this paper leaves the culture as metaphor view undamaged.

The popularity of a clear distinction between organizational culture as a subsystem and as a metaphor must not prevent us from realizing that many authors deal with culture in a way that is somewhere between two extremes, where a robust, demarcable corporate culture of the same ontological character and manageable nature as for example administrative systems, formal hiearchy and core technology is in the one extreme and an all embracing culture metaphor (reducing space for other, possibly complementary metaphors) exists in the other extreme. Many authors are not close to the extremes on a subsystem/metaphor scale, but prefer a more nuanced position.

Of the examples treated in the article, Kilmann advocates a rather extreme subsystem position. Pfeffer also tends to isolate culture as something restricted and separable from the more concrete parts of organizations. His position on "symbolic" action and symbolic outcomes versus the "substantial" parts of organizations is clearly dualistic. This makes it possible to talk about causal effects, but the nature of many acts, structures and situations probably contains a complex mixture of "symbolic" and "substantial" meanings, making this dualistic position difficult to maintain. (Some advocates of symbolic management avoid this dualism and stress heavily the symbolic dimension, e.g. [4]). Schein and Louis are more careful about the possibilities of giving culture a restricted meaning. Schein, and to some extent. Louis, stress the deep structures that govern the organization. This avoidance of a strict subsystem view on culture to some extent accounts for the problems of separing organizational culture from its consequences. In other words, the less culture is seen as a distinct and separable part of the organization and the more it is conceived as something penetrating organizational life in its totality. the greater the problems in talking about outcomes of workplace culture or how culture affects organizational performance.

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