

# Changes in Companies Organization and Identity

## Theoretical Considerations in Connection with a Series of Case Studies of Foreign Acquisitions of Danish Companies

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**Fejl! Bogmærke er ikke defineret**

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**CHANGES IN COMPANIES' ORGANIZATION AND IDENTITY**

**THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN CONNECTION WITH A SERIES OF CASE STUDIES OF FOREIGN ACQUISITIONS OF DANISH COMPANIES**

A paper presented at:

**The Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism**

**June 29th - July 1st 1995, Turku, Finland**

**SELF AND IDENTITY IN ORGANIZATIONS**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

While a lot of research has been done in recent years on the export and investments of Danish companies in foreign markets, little is yet known about how foreign companies act in the Danish market. The number of foreign acquisitions of Danish companies has increased remarkably during the last decade. About 130,000 Danes are now employed in foreign-owned companies, which corresponds to 10% of all employees in the private sector. Developments are thus moving towards a situation where a large and steadily increasing proportion of the Danish workforce will come to work for large foreign concerns and so will be faced with the need to understand, position themselves and act within the strategy of the multinational concern, and the need to be able to communicate with other sections in the concern.

No research has been done about what changes occur in the organization of the Danish companies and with their identity and self-image as a result of the change to foreign ownership. Likewise, little research has been done on what form culture contacts assume in the encounters between the foreign owner and the acquired Danish company, internally in the company or in relation to the world around the company.

One of us has a research background in international business economics and the other in intercultural communication in the workplace. We found it interesting to explore what happens with the organization, culture and identity of a company in the integration process that follows the purchase of the Danish company by the foreign concern. That is why (cooperating with a colleague with a research background in international economics, Jens Erik Torp) we started a research project on "Culture contacts in connection with companies' internationalization process", focussing on foreign acquisitions of companies in Denmark.

We started the project in the expectation that, during the integration process, the foreign owners and employees in the foreign concern would be confronted with conscious and unconscious values, attitudes and forms of action, as they are expressed by the Danish employees in the company, the customers, and other contacts in Danish society.

We assume that the contact between different company cultures will be expressed internally in the organization as differences in behaviour and values in connection with the management style practised and the concrete forms of communication between employees at different levels in the company hierarchy. Cultural differences could also be apparent as differences in the employees' attitude to the work process, to the product and its quality. We also assume that cultural differences could be manifested in the relation between the company and its surroundings, for example in culturally specific differences in action patterns and attitudes in regard to the market and its customers (marketing, image-building and profiling in public opinion), and in relation to unions and public authorities.

Our research project differs from most of the related projects described in the business economic literature, by wanting to analyse both contacts between different organizational cultures and between the national cultures in which they were originally embedded. Typically, business economic cultural research concentrates either on the national cultural dimension (in the field of comparative management, where studies compare two or - generally - more nations for the purpose of isolating culturally determined differences in the way management is practised), or on the company or organizational cultural dimension (in cultural studies of individual organizations).

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In this paper - on the basis of our current research project on "Culture contacts in connection with companies' internationalization process" - we want to reflect on whether and how an idea about culture as social constructions of meaning can be concretely used in analyses of the interaction between different company cultures, which have each originally functioned within different national frameworks.

Our research project will focus on the significance of cultural differences that are manifested at organization level as a result of companies' internationalization processes. The way of presenting the problem in the project therefore in the first place calls for a theoretical discussion of what is to be understood by culture and culture contacts.

By reflecting on different culture-theoretical approaches and different investigative and analysis methods that can be used in the study of culture contacts, we want to arrive at a culture concept that is both theoretically sound and operational for qualitative empirical studies. In this paper this will specifically take the form of a discussion of two approaches to cultural analysis: a value-oriented approach that regards culture as a variable, and a symbolic-interpretive approach that focusses on the processes by which people create a culture by attributing certain meanings to objects, actions, events, utterances and images.

Then we must come to clarifying the question of how it is possible to investigate and analyse culturally produced forms of experience and action, as they are expressed in culture contacts between people, who on the one hand perhaps define themselves in relation to company culture, and on the other hand perhaps feel they have national roots or identifications.

In the project we will try to answer such questions as the following:

- Where, how, and to what extent are there culture contacts internally in the companies and in the companies' relations with the outside world?
- How do the involved companies interpret these culture contacts to the extent that they develop joint strategies and forms of actions as reactions to the culture contact?
- Where and how do employees in foreign-owned companies in Denmark experience concrete cultural differences and possibly cultural conflicts both internally in the company and in relation to the outside world?
- What categories do they use to describe and interpret these culture contacts?
- What consequences do the employees' perception and interpretation of the culture contacts have for interaction between them internally in the company and for their external company communication?

We will try to answer these question in case studies through visits to companies with observations, interviews etc.

We have decided that the empirical part of the investigation for the moment will be directed at the acquisition of Danish companies by foreign companies in the field of electronics. In this branch, there have in fact been a large number of acquisitions by foreign companies in the last decade,

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and, in addition, a number of different nationalities (USA, UK, Germany, France, Norway, Holland, Belgium, South Korea) are represented among the takeover companies (cf. Gertsen, Srderberg, Torp, 1995).

We have established contact with seven selected companies and have made interviews, in order to start an explorative analysis of their experiences with culture contacts between foreign and Danish companies. The company interviews will be supplemented with interviews with representatives for unions, trade councils, research centres, university departments who do research within the field, and others.

The purpose is to acquire an insight through observations and interviews in the companies in question and with the local organizations, which can give an inductive contribution to determining a relevant investigation design for fuller case studies. These studies could also include visits to the foreign parent companies of the electronic companies in question.

The purpose of the following reflections, meanwhile, is primarily to discuss the culture concept to be used in the analysis of the culture contacts that occur in foreign companies that become established in Denmark. By culture contacts we understand contacts between different organizational cultures and different national traditions.

## 2. APPROACHES TO CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Even though analyses of the significance of cultural differences in connection with companies' internationalization is still a relatively new investigative field, it is an area that is now widely recognized as important by both practitioners and theoreticians, in principle at least. In many ways, culture has been increasingly in focus in recent years, both in the social debate and in applied business economic research, for example in connection with management, organizational studies and marketing.

But while culture is being put into words and spoken about, and cultural differences are becoming part of social discourse, consensus about what we are to understand as culture has become even more difficult to achieve, and it is no less difficult to find ways to investigate and analyse cultures and cultural processes of change.

One of the difficulties is that the classic anthropological culture concept, which has increasingly gained ground in humanistic, sociological and business economic circles during the past 10-15 years, is a concept that has become gravely problematical and eagerly deconstructed within the field of anthropology during the same period (cf. Hannerz 1992 and Liep & Fog-Olwig, 1994).

In the empirical investigation of culture contacts in connection with foreign acquisitions of companies in Denmark, we must at the same time relate to culture in two contexts: society and company. And in addition we have to relate to two - or perhaps, more correctly, three - related but different theoretical traditions.

The oldest and most developed one is the anthropological research tradition, since anthropology is the science that is most explicitly concerned with culture at the social level.

The other tradition to which we must relate, organization and management literature, has been

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greatly inspired by anthropology, as regards both the formulation of theories about management in different nations (comparative management) and theories about organizational culture. But the ways the culture concept is used within comparative management and within organizational culture are very different, both as regards the theoretical basis and the methods. These differences are partially - but far from exclusively - contingent on the different focus: society and organization/company.

In the classic perspective, which came into being with anthropological research in the 1950s and 60s, culture is perceived as something the members of society have and bear as something shared, on the strength of being socialized into a given culture that is handed down from generation to generation as collective meaning homogeneously distributed in society. If culture is tendentially perceived as something static, an empiric category, we as culture analysts can explore culture, observe behaviour, ask individuals about their attitudes and values and systematize our data and define the characteristics that make a certain culture distinctive.

In this perspective, cultures are perceived in principle as closed systems in equilibrium, marked by sets of rules, regularity and predictability. This perception has its basis in functionalism, which regards the single parts of culture as parts of a whole, each with its necessary function for maintenance and stabilization of the whole.

These are the rules which the culture members are socialized to follow, but it is the task of the cultural analyst to analyse culture and point out its basic assumptions, whether culture is now regarded as a homogeneous system of behaviour, a collective system of values or a collective system of meaning. Culture thus constitutes a type of "text", which the cultural analyst can read and interpret in order to draw up hypotheses about the underlying "cultural grammar", the system of rules of play that unconsciously control cultural practice.

In addition, culture is regarded as a compact whole, clearly distinguished from other cultures. This perception is connected to the idea of the nation or the national state as a community of people united by the same language and culture.

This classic concept of culture has been disputed by modern anthropological researchers (cf. Hannerz, 1992 and Barth, 1994a). The idea that culture is an empirical category has been abandoned for a perception of culture as an analytical category.

With a basis in a view of culture as an empirical category, culture is perceived as a psychological system that exists objectively in the psyche of the culture-bearer. This entity can be found by analysis, through registration and systematization of people's behaviour, which it is assumed is controlled by their attitudes and values. This mentalist approach is thus concerned with the relationships between basic assumptions, values and their overt representations in artefacts and actions.

If culture instead is perceived as an analytical category, this in contrast implies that culture is perceived as a theoretical construction and as a position on the basis of which we sense, speak and act, both as cultural actors and as cultural analysts. The abstractions that can be produced by cultural analysis are indeed derived from observed patterns in the communication and behaviour of a group of people taken as a whole. But within this approach the cultural analyst is aware of the fact that you cannot observe and describe another culture without taking with you a reflection

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of your own cultural perspective, your cognitive interests and the tools you use for sensing and cognition. Culture in this perspective is perceived not as something the individual has, but on the other hand as a fellowship that is created between people and by people. Culture is consequently the meanings people produce and shape in their contacts with one another.

This is true both for the cultural meanings produced and managed by inhabitants within a nation, by employees in an organizational setting, and by informants and cultural analysts in an empirical investigation of culture contacts within an organisation.

Within this approach to culture as an analytical category it is thus emphasized that it is only possible to approach culture with concepts and analytical categories which in themselves are tools developed as a result of a culturally-determined interest for reflection on cultural differences. (For a more detailed explanation of this differentiation between culture as empirical category and as analytical category, see Hastrup, 1989).

Social reality has at the same time contributed to undermining the classic anthropological perception of culture as a static phenomenon, and as a homogeneous and well-delimited unity. A stable and consistent culture, where there is consensus among the members of the culture about knowledge, behaviour, attitudes and norms, of the kind previously described in many anthropological field studies of, for example, island societies, or a closely interwoven, almost isolated, tribal society, is hardly met with today, no matter where in the world one is. And as regards the old anthropological descriptions, it can indeed be discussed whether the consistency in the account might not be due to the anthropologist's (unconscious) wish to be able to describe a coherent cultural system, where order and stability prevailed.

If we just keep to Europe, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the national-romantic perception of Europe as a patchwork of local cultures, where the boundaries between local cultures follow the national boundaries. "The patchwork" has always been a theoretical abstraction. But the ideas about the uniformity and coherence of national cultures, ideas built up during the last 150-200 years in pace with the processes of forming nations and inventing national cultures, are increasingly disputed. Partly because of the political and economic integration in Western Europe and partly because boundaries have been abolished or shifted, especially in the most recent past, when the Berlin Wall collapsed, the Iron Curtain rusted and unions of states disintegrated. At the same time, the building up of new national and ethnic collective cultures also helps to illustrate the fragility of the cultural constructions.

At the same time there has been a great migration of labour from the South to the North and from the East to the West. And this migration, together with the flood of refugees, has helped to make European society increasingly multi-cultural and at the same time has helped to put culture as a concept on the agenda and to accelerate the discussion about which cultural differences make a difference.

The internationalization of the economy and politics, as well as the migration and the extension of world-wide communication systems, has had the effect that ever increasing numbers of people no longer primarily define themselves by their affiliation to a geographic locality (a town, a region or a nation), where they have "roots", and to a language that is their "mother tongue". This applies in particular to the many people who today live in so-called trans-national cultures. These are people who are employed in multinational companies, international organizations and research institutions, or

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who are connected with the diplomatic service or perhaps an international news service agency. It is in a certain sense a prerequisite for them that, to be able to work and be comfortable, they learn new methods of handling social constructions of meaning that deviate from the local clusters of meaning and ways of managing meaning in which they were originally socialized.(cf. Hannerz, 1990).

Anyway, the cultures that we find today in societies all over the world are extremely complex and dynamic. We are in a situation where the culturally specific in our experiences and forms of action on the one hand is becoming increasingly evident in many different spheres. And, on the other hand, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to define and delimit what we mean when we talk about culture. This is the point of departure for our theoretical reflections about the empirical investigation of culture contacts in connection with the foreign takeover of companies in Denmark.

The first thing we can establish is that, in a modern multi-cultural society like the Danish society, the idea of one coherent and uniform culture within the boundaries of the nation seems by now inadequate. Instead we must perceive cultures as dynamic, marked by continual changes and contradictions. And consequently, we must be aware that people have a plurality of different perceptions and strategies within the framework of the nation. People create and develop a large number of cultural communities, local, national and trans-national, and define themselves in relation to these. These cultures can represent values, attitudes and forms of behaviour that are mutually incompatible. So this sharing of culture is, in principle, only situational; it does not necessarily go beyond certain contextual circumstances. The cultures that are constructed and developed within a given society are not therefore unequivocal and uniform entities either, but on the contrary, they are complex, heterogeneous and equivocal.

We have now briefly outlined some differences between the classic cultural concept from anthropology and the perception of culture that is today gaining a strong foothold in modern anthropology. The discussion in the theory clarification part of phase I of the research project will largely be centred on the zone of confrontation between, on the one hand, anthropology as a general culture science, and on the other hand, two different areas in organization and management theory, which reflect on cultural differences and their consequences: comparative management and organizational culture.

In the following we will look at the way different approaches to cultural analysis have been used in organization and management theory. In this connection we are only interested in identifying broad tendencies and so will not go into detail about differences between individual researchers in each of the two approaches we will look at more closely:

- analyses where culture is regarded as a variable
- analyses where culture is regarded as a socially constructed inventory of meanings

The two approaches also represent a chronological development in the science of anthropology, even though there are naturally some temporal overlaps. For a closer characterization of the two approaches in this connection, the reader is referred to Gertsen (1990) and Srderberg and Villemoes (1994).

### **3. CULTURE AS A VARIABLE: EXAMPLES FROM MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**



## RESEARCH

If we look at research in comparative management, we can note that the perception of culture as an independent variable has been very influential. The researcher who is probably the most renowned in this field of research, Geert Hofstede (1984), was greatly inspired by some American anthropologists who dominated anthropological discussion in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1962) as well as Inkeles and Levinson (1954), whose suggestions for cultural universals, "standard analytic issues", correspond with Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1984; p. 37):

- power distance
- uncertainty avoidance
- individualism versus collectivism
- masculinity versus femininity

In addition to these, Hofstede later added a fifth dimension: short-term contra long-term life orientation (cf. Hofstede, 1992), which is particularly relevant when Asian and Western cultures are to be compared. Hofstede defines these cultural dimensions as aspects of a culture that can be measured in relation to other cultures. Hofstede asserts that what is in question are basic value orientations that are present in all cultures, where the differences then represent the different solutions that cultures (= nations) have to the collective human problems. They should thus be cultural universals, even though Hofstede does not postulate that his cultural dimensions are in any way exhaustive.

Hofstede's concept of culture is based on the idea of "mental programming" of the individual, who is equipped with some particular patterns that fundamentally influence his way of thinking, feeling and acting. (Hofstede 1991, p. 16). Mental programs according to Hofstede are mental structures that determine our conduct and our way of perceiving the world. With the programming metaphor taken from the computer world, Hofstede presupposes a perception of the person as a passive being as regards culture, who is given an input that determines behaviour by the socialization process. This view of people as cultural products is completely in tune with the idea that influences the so-called process school in communication theory, where the receiver is correspondingly regarded as a passive object for influence through text and speech (cf. for example Srdereberg and Villemoes, 1994). If a person throughout his childhood and youth is "programmed" with particular values and attitudes, then the person is perceived as a "culture-bearer", a person who carries around and articulates particular cultural values and norms.

Values are the fundamental components in the mental programs; they constitute the nucleus of culture. Hofstede (1984) accordingly defines culture as follows:

"Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes members of one group from another" (p.21).

For Hofstede, culture is thus primarily a system of collective behavioural-determining values, as it were, a group's "personality". The cultural values help to determine how the group reacts to its surroundings. Hofstede uses his culture definition on nations, organizations and small groups of every kind. In Hofstede (1992) the conceptual apparatus is used in connection with comparative studies of organizational cultures.

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Trompenaars' investigations (1993) are yet another example of extensive empirical studies, based on value- oriented anthropological theory. Even though this is not explicitly stated, Trompenaars uses, in almost identical words, Parsons and Shils' suggestions for the cultural universals, which they have called "pattern variables":

- Relationships with people
  - Universalism versus particularism
  - Individualism versus collectivism
  - Neutral or emotional
  - Specific versus diffuse
  - Achievement versus ascription
- Attitudes to time
- Attitudes to the environment

Hofstede, Trompenaars and many other researchers in comparative management (cf. Ronen's overview of the subject, 1986) try to infer common national features in the way people act, think and formulate rules and norms for their own and others' behaviour from interview statements and answers to questionnaires.

This line of thought, which is the basis of Hofstede's and Trompenaars' research, implies the idea that people broadly shape themselves according to the demands and expectations of their surroundings, and that they develop personality characteristics and ways of acting that are in accordance with a particular regional or national character. But such an idea about a national or regional character is problematic, since, in principle, it is difficult to combine with a perception of people as active producers of culture. When it is claimed that everybody shares the same culture, then the individual can be anonymous, a nobody.

Cultural analysis in this research tradition is influenced by a search for general elements, for regularities, which can be used to predict future behaviour, for example a particular management style based on particular values. Comparative management research is therefore very much in favour with multinational companies and organizations.

Quantitative methods are frequently used in comparative cultural studies, although it is not here claimed that there is a mechanical connection between the choice of a positivistic or a hermeneutic paradigm, and the choice of a culture concept and a methodology for cultural investigation and analysis. Measuring cultural differences, or describing such differences, is to enable comparison between many cultures on a uniform basis. In this effort, culture is reduced to an independent variable, a background factor in relation to the company, on account of the fact that the company functions in a particular cultural = national context.

Nevertheless, a problem with the measurement/description of cultural differences is that the cultural analytical models used are perhaps not general at all, but on the contrary can represent the author's (unconscious) effort to project his own (culturally determined, to some extent or other) perception of the world onto other groups, so that instead there is a form of ethnocentric conceptualization of cultural differences. The risk of ethnocentric projection exists of course in every cultural analysis. But it is greater when a pre-determined general model is used in a questionnaire investigation.

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In this connection, it should be mentioned that the universalistic ambition, which is the point of departure for comparative cultural studies like Hofstede's and Trompenaars', has also become questioned as problematical in the current anthropological discussion on scientific truth and validity and the conditions for producing valid knowledge on cultural differences (cf. Hastrup, 1992). Also the idea that there is an unequivocal connection between people's expressed values and what they actually do has been disputed in both sociology and modern anthropology, (cf. Barth, 1994b).

Hofstede and Trompenaars, who dominate current research on comparative management, build, as we have shown, on the basis of a line of thought created by American anthropologists in the 50s and the beginning of the 60s. Thus, there seems to be a sort of time lag, when we look at the culture concept that this branch of management literature has chosen to use. As mentioned above, this classic culture concept has meanwhile been abandoned by the majority of anthropologists in favour of understanding cultures as social constructions of meaning as an activity in which the actors and the process is taken seriously.

In the research field of organizational culture, too, the value approach has inspired a number of theoreticians. Here, company culture is regarded as the values which the members of the organization have in common. These values can be expressed in cultural artifacts and in myths, rituals, special language and in accounts of the history of the company.

In studies of "corporate culture", organizational culture is regarded as consisting of a collection of variables, and they are precisely value orientations that are typical. It is assumed that these values are very susceptible to influence from management, and "corporate culture" is therefore seen as an instrument that can help to ensure effective fulfillment of the strategic goals set by management. It is also taken for granted that an organizational culture should preferably be as homogeneous as possible. This is taken as an expression of its strength and contextual power. Subcultures within an organization are consequently regarded as hindrances in relation to fulfilling the goals of the organization. We find striking advocates for this integration perspective (cf. section 5.) among some of the authors who helped to spread the concept of corporate culture and make it popular in a company context: Peters & Waterman (1982) and Deal & Kennedy (1982).

In functionalistic organizational culture research, culture is seen as a closed system, where every single element has a function in the whole. Organizational culture is regarded as a system of values held in common, which serve important functions. Culture is a mechanism whose primary function is to integrate the organization internally and to adapt the organization to its surroundings. Organizational culture should thus help to give coherence to the company internally, so the social system is stabilized. Organizational culture should give the employees an identity so they feel part of a larger group and consciously work at strengthening this group by various actions. In the next place, organizational culture should help to adapt the company to its surroundings so the company can survive changing demands and expectations. In external communication, the company should therefore mark its distinctive character and distinguish and profile the company in relation to its competitors and customers.

When management and employees in a company have to come to an agreement about the content of the work and their relationship with each other, they have to deal with a number of questions

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that are concerned with values, such as:

- what type of jobs will we concentrate on?
- what should characterize our relationship to the customers/users?
- what form of division of labour do we want to have?
- what expectations and demands have we to the manager and management of the company?
- how and where should decisions be made?
- how do we criticise each other?
- how do we work out conflicts?
- how close should we be to each other?
- how open should we be with each other?

(Christrup, 1993, p. 114-115)

Organizational culture can thus be seen in the functionalistic perspective as a "consensus creating, normative "glue"" (Schultz, 1990, p. 20), that can be influenced by the management so that the survival and efficiency of the organization is ensured as well as possible. But the functionalists do not depict management's possibilities of control and direction in quite such an unproblematical way as is done by representatives of the rationalistic perspective of "corporate culture". The functionalists do not reject the existence of subcultures, but it is still the integrating role of culture that they emphasise. They are less occupied with internal contradictions, paradoxes and complexity.

#### 4. CULTURE AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND MANAGEMENT OF MEANING EXAMPLES FROM MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE RESEARCH

In the branch of anthropology that is oriented towards symbolization and interpretation processes, culture is regarded as being based on collective codes or interpretation patterns, which to some extent or other are produced, reproduced or changed by the members identifying with these cultural modes of thought and action. Until now, we have been unable to find any examples of literature in the field of comparative management that are based on this symbolic-interpretive approach.

The research designs traditionally used in comparative management probably also make it difficult in practice to use a symbolic-interpretive approach. Because, typically, these designs are quantitative investigations, usually with relatively many respondents spread through different countries. These investigations, as already mentioned, aim at measuring and comparing countries as regards selected, already defined cultural dimensions, which, more or less implicitly, are considered to be universal.

If it could be imagined that a symbolic-interpretive approach were used in this field, a research design based on case studies, with observations, interviews and collection of documents, would be more obvious. If it is wished to maintain the comparative aspect, then the themes that are to be examined will have to be determined to a certain extent, and also the analysis dimensions to be used on the cases in question. But at the same time, the idea that nationality is the same as a culture in the sense of a collective value system must be abolished.

An important part of the newest theory on organizational culture presupposes meanwhile an

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understanding of culture as the ongoing social construction and management of meaning. Organizational culture researchers working from this perspective (Smircich, 1985; Gioia, 1986) work differently. But they all see organizational reality as a cultural universe that is established, developed and changed through the actors' successive attributions of meaning.

When the symbolic-interpretive perspective is applied to organizational culture, the culture is regarded as a web or network of meanings which the employees themselves create about their work place and their work group. So organizational culture is here understood as a system of meaning that creates a symbolic network for the members of the culture. The symbols are signs which are attributed a meaning so they refer to something other than themselves. These symbols can be physical objects, actions, events, statements and images.

As a consequence of this symbolic-interpretive perspective, the company is regarded as a human system, where the employees individually, and as members of subcultures in the company ( the management group, the technicians, the sales staff and workers in production, or different national and ethnic groupings in the company), attribute symbolic meaning to their own and others' actions and utterances. Just as they interpret the objects with which they surround themselves and the images of itself communicated by the company and its employees to the world around them.

In our investigation of the establishment of foreign companies in Denmark, we will examine from a symbolic-interpretive perspective the ideas that different groups of employees attach to the physical symbols, action symbols and verbal symbols of the company in sense-making processes.

In particular, it is naturally relevant to look at the changes occasioned by the foreign acquisition. From such a perspective, we will not be satisfied by observing and registering cultural artifacts. As cultural analysts and "sign readers", we will interpret our observations more radically, in order to clarify the meaning each sign has for the actors, and the context in which the actors use the signs and attach meaning to them. In addition we will see whether there is consensus or dispute about the interpretation of the symbols. Are the symbols consciously used in an attempt to achieve integration between the different national traditions and company cultures that are to be combined? Or the reverse, to register opposition to such integration attempts.

Since we have only established contact with the companies at present and are now about to begin a long period of collecting data, this paper cannot present analyses results. But we can give some examples of possible angles of approach based on the impression we have got from our pilot interviews and introductory observations.

In an analysis of a company's physical symbols, it can be interesting to decipher the meanings that various groups of employees attribute to such things as the company's architecture, logo, design, the way the rooms are furnished or the clothing of the employees.

In a Danish electronic company that was acquired by an American concern in November 1994, we could note that a little Danish and a little American flag stood beside each other on the counter in the company's reception area. This was one of the first things a visitor would catch sight of. The flags had been used as table decorations at a party for all the company's employees immediately after the acquisition. Now they served as a signal to visitors that the company was no longer Danish, at a time when a new logo had not yet been created nor the company name

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changed. When we got into conversation with the receptionist, she showed us, on her own initiative, the little present all the employees had received at the party. It was a small square with a cork pad underneath, and on the black surface were printed in gold letters the names of the Danish and the American companies, which were now facing a lengthy integration process. It was obvious that the receptionist thought the gift was ugly. But she had to face the reality, that means to accept the foreign acquisition of the former Danish company, so instead of throwing the symbolic present, she had chosen to use it as a table mat for her tea mug, so the gift at least served a useful purpose.

Action symbols encompass the rituals that can be understood as symbolic actions, which are systematized and connected with certain social situations. In an analysis of a company's rituals, for example, employment and dismissal rituals, meeting rituals, negotiation rituals, party rituals, it is therefore not enough just to note the rituals that occur in the company. We also have to investigate the rules they follow, the purpose they serve in the company culture and what meanings the various groups of employees attach to the implementation of the individual rituals and deviations from them.

In the company mentioned above, the acquisition was celebrated, on the initiative of the American company, by a party for all the employees and their partners, i.e. all categories of employees from management to engineers and technicians to secretaries and production workers. Our pilot interviews indicate that at least some of the Danish employees have very different expectations about the way such a festal event should be arranged than the American management from the new parent company.

The Americans had brought baseball caps printed with the names of the two companies for all the people at the party. The Americans' intention was probably to signal interdependence and team spirit. But some of the Danes found it comical, ridiculous or even humiliating to have to put on a baseball cap when they had dressed up in good clothes for the occasion.

After a good three-course dinner and accompanying wine, the chairman of the board of directors of the American concern made an hour-long speech at 10 pm, where he spoke in great detail about the technical explanations for why it was so good that the Danish and the American company could supplement each others' competence. According to the receptionist, many of the Danish employees regarded the speech as very out of place and as a sign of no sense of the occasion. The Danish employees would rather have chatted and danced, instead of hearing about the American concern's excellence and future prospects. The American chairman of the board, who had already been given the nick name of "Sun King" by some of the Danish employees in the company, was perceived as unpleasantly self-assertive. "We Danes know well that we are good. That was why we were acquired by the Americans. But we don't have to stand up and draw attention to ourselves because of it."

In an analysis of a company's verbal symbols we will try to isolate some of the myths that are alive in the company and analyse whether they help to legitimate the employees' choice of action and to maintain the company's particular vision of itself and its world view. We will also investigate who "writes" the history of the company and what sort of a history of heroes, enemies, critical incidents and successes that the company's "chronicle writers" construct. Is the foreign acquisition of the company for example experienced as a "critical incident", and if that is the case,

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how is it described by various actors from different positions inside and outside the company?

We could note in our pilot interviews that the employees and management in several of the companies frequently used family metaphors when they spoke about the acquisition. In one of the companies, the acquisition was spoken about as a "marriage of convenience" - in a way they would have preferred to continue on their own, but new capital was necessary to ensure the survival of the company. In another case, where the Danish company was a subsidiary company that a large Danish concern had sold off, the concern director was quoted in the newspapers as saying that "the sale feels as if a beloved daughter was being given in marriage and leading her to the altar" - sad and emotional, but hopefully for "her" best. A related metaphor used in one of the electronic companies about developments in relation to the acquiring foreign company was that, at a certain time, it had to be admitted that "the honeymoon" was over - after the initial euphoria the differences began to appear in earnest, which in some cases had given problems.

In one case, the foreign takeover company was seen as a "saviour" who had made the future existence of the company possible and so ensured continued employment for the employees. The previous Danish management was regarded on the other hand as the "villains" in the events - because they had "allowed the safe to stand open" and thus drained the company of the necessary capital for continued research and development. In addition, according to several employees, there had been too many "chiefs" previously, while the new managing director, an Englishman who had been put into the job by the foreign concern, was a strong, decisive and visible leader, who did not leave room for others beside him.

The economic and strategic starting situation of the Danish company is crucial for the employees' interpretation of the relationship to the new parent company: has the company been bought as an attractive partner with a particular potential for continued development and/or production, or does the value of the company consist exclusively of representing a short-term possibility of profit for the parent company, for example through transfer of technological competency from the subsidiary company, which would then in the long term risk losing its own reason for existence?

We will also try to be on the watch-out for special language codes in the company, for example certain modes of speech or slogans that serve the purpose of marking the fellowship of certain employee groups: this perhaps in contrast to other groups whose perspective and positions the Danish employees do not share, for example the foreign owners, members of the board and employees.

In our pilot interviews we noticed in some cases that the foreign parent company and its representatives were spoken about in a way that indicated that the acquisition by the foreign company actualizes the national stereotypes both in the Danish companies that are taken over and in the neighbouring companies that profile themselves in relation to them. The expression "Ordnung muss sein" was mentioned several times in connection with an acquisition by a German company, to illustrate the primary area for the differences and difficulties. The Germans were interpreted as being bureaucratic, as people who put great emphasis on formalizing all work procedures, and who replaced the flat decision-making structure and delegation of responsibility typical of the Danish entrepreneurial culture with a pronounced hierarchical structure and top-down communication. This impression was summarized by an informant in the expression that now "you could hear the tramp of jackboots in the corridors" in the neighbouring company.

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Generally, however, our impression from the first interviews is that the relationship with the foreign takeover company and the way their "differentness" is interpreted changes in the course of time. The stereotype ideas about other nations are most prevalent at the beginning, before the employees have had personal contact with the foreigners or in their very first meetings with them. Here the stereotype ideas about nations act as a filter for the perception of foreigners, and they are used as simple explanations of behaviour that strikes the Danes as strange or irritating. Later the stereotype ideas about particular national characters recede, and differences in attitudes and behaviour are interpreted and explained to a greater extent in other ways, for example as an expression of the economic interests, strategic aims, and special organizational culture of the foreign company or as an expression of certain employees' personality. So it is no longer Germans in general that are bureaucratic or dictatorial, but the directors in the management of the parent company who represent a traditional authoritarian management style or for some reason are unpleasant, inflexible, bad at listening and having a dialogue with the Danes, or whatever the problem is.

It is also part of the symbolic-interpretive analysis perspective to form an impression of the tabu areas in company culture. Here we will try to find out what are the subjects that may not be talked about in the company. (For example they could be differences in wages, alcohol problems or individual career plans, conflicts between management and ordinary employees or stereotypes in the perception of "them" (the strangers, foreigners, owners) and "us" (the Danish employees)). Do the company's employees respect these tabu areas? If the boundaries are disputed or overstepped, who does the overstepping and what is their purpose in doing so? And how do the other employees react to overstepping the tabu limits of the company culture?

The symbolic meanings that the actors in the company articulate constitute a pattern, which, seen from an integration perspective (cf. section 5), should give the company a structure in the form of shared interpretations and images of the company itself and its surroundings.

When an organizational culture is regarded as a system of symbols and interpretation patterns, what is studied is how the organizational culture, or subcultures within the organization, is created, maintained and changed in the communication processes between people, who consciously and unconsciously perform certain actions, surround themselves with certain cultural signs and symbols and acclaim certain actions and values. All in an effort to express the meaning of the joint culture which they currently choose to be part of.

By using construction and management of meaning as an analysis approach, the organizational culture, or subcultures within the organization, no longer has the form of an objective reality, an empirical category. On the contrary, organizational cultures have the form of discourses, i.e. a way in which people jointly construct meanings that organize their actions and influence their images of themselves and the others. To the extent that a coherent culture exists (cf. the integration perspective) or a number of subcultures (cf. the differentiation perspective), the day-to-day life in the organization can be regarded as a sort of text or texts, which the cultural analyst reads, in order to identify the meanings people attach to them, just as a literature researcher reads and interprets literary texts. But, in principle, there will always be a multiplicity of perspectives and voices and several different interpretation possibilities. Cultures as texts will be differently read, by men and women, managers, technicians, salespeople and workers. The concrete interpretations will also depend on the perspective and comparative basis of the cultural analyst, as well as the culturally specific terms and concepts with which the cultural analyst chooses to



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describe and analyse the culture. The symbolic-interpretive perspective on organizational culture or sub-cultures in a company thus opens up for a cultural analysis that can also contain complexity, inconsistencies and paradoxes. At the same time, this perspective implies that one predominantly chooses to work with qualitative data, which are worked with in order to increase understanding of what is specific in the context; an understanding rooted in the concrete knowledge of cultural differences (Hastrup, 1992, p.40ff).

### 5. THREE PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT: INTEGRATION, DIFFERENTIATION AND FRAGMENTATION

When we spoke in the previous sections about two different approaches to culture, namely culture as a variable or culture as social construction and management of meaning, we have also in our differentiation emphasized what is in focus in the actual analysis: values or sense-making. But one could also choose to categorize the different approaches to cultural analysis from a general overview of how a culture is perceived and delimited.

An example of such a categorization of approaches in organizational culture research can be found in Joanne Martin's "Cultures in Organizations" (1992). Here she examines three different perspectives in research in organizational cultures: the integration perspective, the differentiation perspective and the fragmentation perspective.

Within the **integration perspective** the emphasis is on harmony and homogeneity - that is particularly what is looked for when a culture is analysed. A set of themes (often formulated as values and basic assumptions) are described as common for all members in the organizational culture, irrespective of their position in the hierarchy; it is assumed that there exists an organization-wide consensus. It is supposed that the common themes are consistently articulated in a multitude of cultural manifestations; formal as well as informal forms of practice. The symbolic meanings of cultural forms, too, such as the physical arrangement of the work space, clothing, rituals, organizational stories and jargon are described as congruent with the content themes, i.e. the values and basic assumptions. In the integration perspective, it is assumed that people are aware of what they are to do and why they do it. Organizations are described as rational systems, where clarity and transparency prevail. There is no room in the integration perspective for being concerned with ambiguity. On the contrary, the function of culture as a product of sense-making activity is to avoid anxiety, to control the uncontrollable and make the uncertain predictable. In this way culture helps to control actions and circumstances that could potentially threaten or disrupt the harmony.

The integration perspective, which has many similarities with the classic anthropological cultural concept, is typically found in representatives of a value-oriented view of culture; in the field of organizational culture, for example, in Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982), and Schein (1986).

The **differentiation perspective** does not deny the existence of a certain degree of similarities, consistencies and unities in the organization. But here efforts are made to investigate the organization from various subcultural perspectives, in order to focus on and investigate differences in power and conflicts of interests between groups of organization members and how they influences their interpretations of the organizational reality. In this way, the differentiation perspective will often help, for example, to make visible the perspective on organizations that

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members without power or status apply to the management. It is thus assumed that subcultures exist - which can in turn be mutually in conflict or in harmony - within the organization. In cases of conflict between subcultures, it is supposed that the members of the individual subcultures are aware of what the disagreements are about. In this way, clarity within the individual subcultures prevails; ambiguity is to be found in the interface between them. The differentiation perspective is thus sceptical about the idea that consensus exists organization-wide, even though there can be consensus within the individual subcultures. It is also assumed that interpretation of themes and practices will often be inconsistent and that there can be disagreement between the expressed values and the actual practice.

The differentiation perspective in principle can be expressed in both a value-oriented cultural analysis where culture is perceived as a variable and in a symbolic-interpretive approach to organizational analysis where culture is perceived as social construction and management of meaning. But just as in the integration perspective, it is presupposed that we can define and delimit organizational subcultures clearly in relation to their surroundings - that we know where they begin and end. Subcultures are seen as creating coherent meaning systems, subcultures are islands of clarity; "ambiguity is channelled into the currents that swirl around the edges of these islands" (op.cit. p. 94).

The **fragmentation perspective** brings ambiguity to the foreground of a cultural description. It emphasizes that the boundaries between a culture and its surroundings are unclear, permeable and in flux. A culture is not regarded as a coherent unit with clear boundaries, but as a network, a web of meanings, that endlessly refer to something other than themselves. In relation to a cultural analysis, this means that the researcher focusses on a multiplicity of voices and meanings and interpretations. Both the organization and the world around it are complex, full of paradoxes and unpredictable. In contrast to the two previous perspectives, where the focus was on consistency and/or inconsistency (i.e. where differences are represented in oppositional modes of thinking, such as dichotomies (superior vs. subordinate, management vs. labour, men vs. women, Danish vs. foreign), here the focus is on exploring the complexity of the relations between one cultural manifestation and another. These relations are typically unclear and with multiple meanings. A fragmentation perspective means underlining the multiplicity of interpretations, which seldom help to create stable consensus in the organization.

The fragmentation perspective is explicitly concerned with the same scientific theoretical presentation of problems as modern deconstructivistic anthropological science. Research in organizational culture on the basis of the fragmentation perspective will therefore in its point of departure reflect an admission that the world is not influenced by a unifying order, by predictability and consensus about interpretations, but on the contrary, by dissolution of tradition, by cultural plurality and complexity, and thus, by many voices, positions, perspectives and interpretations involved in the social construction of fluctuating cultural communities (cf. Barth, 1994a and Hannerz, 1992).

## 6. SUMMING UP

On a completely general level, we have established that human beings not just accept the norms and values of a given culture and live in complete conformity with it as "bearers" of a given culture. It is true that people are subject to some material conditions of life, but both the social and cultural context, which among other things constitute socialization conditions, are in a

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constant state of change. At the same time a person is an active social being, who develops in communication; through interaction with other people and by virtue of the experiences he acquires. In every culture, there is therefore scope for different types of actions, attitudes and values and for different symbolization and interpretation processes. There are all the time discussions between people about what is good and bad, right and wrong etc. Cultural norms and values are therefore not unchangeable, they are, on the contrary, constantly being discussed and with that the object of symbolization, interpretation and reflection. That is why it is by making a choice within an extensive cultural repertoire that we as "culture producers" at one and the same time create, maintain and change the various cultures in relation to which we define ourselves. From the family over work groupings to local, national or transnational groupings.

The value-oriented theoreticians presuppose more or less implicitly that a culture is consistent and homogeneous, and that in empirical investigations culture can therefore be conveniently isolated as a variable. But particularly in modern complex societies, cultures will be strongly marked by conflicts, breaks and multiple meanings. The idea of cultural homogeneity and integration within the organization is thus a simplified myth.

Culture is not a stable factor either, which in itself causes people to behave in a certain way. On the contrary, social constructions of meanings are created, managed and changed in a continuous process when people interact. Cultures create people as members of societies, but people influence the shared cultures of which they are part just as much. Cultures are thus not static but dynamic, and this is something that an understanding of cultures as collective constructions of meaning and interpretation better takes into account.

In our empirical investigation of cultural contacts in companies' internationalization process we will try to operationalize a culture concept within the symbolic-interpretive approach. But we will still be open to various perspectives on organization (integration, differentiation and fragmentation). That is why we will look for structures and patterns of meaning that help to create order, stability and coherence within the company culture as a whole and within certain subcultural groupings. At the same time, we will point out possible paradoxes and contradictions in the company's symbolic universe and point out traces of "struggles" between actors and groups of these about interpretations.

In an intercultural organization like a foreign company in Denmark, it can be obvious to investigate the concrete constructions of meaning among different national and ethnic groupings. We assume that foreign employees, who are in a Danish subsidiary company for a time, are particularly exposed to different interpretations of their role, for example as coordinator or controller. There are grounds to assume that cultural conflicts are particularly sharp around these people. That is why it is important both to involve these people themselves as informants and to ask about other actors' interpretations of their role. In order to be open for a differentiation perspective, we will talk to different employee groups (subcultures?) in the company hierarchy and try to visit informants outside the company. We will make a number of interviews on the level of top management, among other things to get an impression of the central role management plays in the symbolization and interpretation of the values that the foreign company wants to communicate. In addition, we have also decided to make interviews with development engineers and technicians, sales staff, secretaries and skilled and unskilled workers in production. In order to illustrate the company's interaction with the local milieu, we will also interview trade union leaders and representatives for the local trade council as well as liaison organizations between the

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university and the business community.

Cultural patterns of meaning are created, maintained and change continuously through the actors' communication processes. Our empirical investigation will perhaps primarily give snapshot pictures of a particular point in the daily life of the company, and reports of the interpretations of the work situations that prevail at a given point in time in different groups of employees. But with our interest in analysing cultural contacts we will try just as much to trace the cultural dynamism and the process of cultural change that are started when the foreign company acquires the Danish company and the cultural contacts this brings about.

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