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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ambiguous culture in Greenland police: Proposing a multi-dimensional framework of organizational culture for Human Resource Management theory and practice

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Abstract

This article places ambiguity at the centre of Human Resource Management theory and practice of organizational culture and advances a multi-dimensional framework that makes productive use of tensions between cultural integration and differentiation. Providing an illustrative analysis of Greenland Police, we identify a clash between a strong integrational pull and a similarly powerful differentiating force, involving an integrated occupational culture and differentiated national sub-cultures. This clash, we show, becomes productive when organizational members articulate and enact ambiguous identities. Emphasising the contextuality of organizational culture, we do not believe the empirical findings to be generalisable, but, instead, offer the analytical framework for studying multi-dimensional organizational culture as our main contribution. Conceptually, we emphasise how ambiguity is articulated in and between integration and differentiation, thus enhancing the relationality of the dimensions. The practical aim is to set ambiguous dynamics in motion that enable productive relations between different cultural dimensions.

Abbreviations: HR, Human Resources; HRM, Human Resource Management.

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KEYWORDS

ambiguity, culture, differentiation, HRM, hybridity, integration

Practitioner notes**What is currently known?**

- Understanding organizational culture is crucial for successful Human Resource Management HRM (change) initiatives.
- However, developing strong cultures that foster committed employees is difficult and most cultural change initiatives fail.
- Most accounts of culture in HRM are based on integration or, alternatively, differentiation while accounts of cultural ambiguity are scarce.

What this paper adds?

- Conducting cultural analyses that account for ambiguity (rather than attempting to eradicate it) is paramount for the advancement of HRM studies of organizational culture.
- Analysing fluid and less measurable dynamics of ambiguous culture makes visible the potential benefits of creating room for dissent and change within the organization.
- Focussing on ambiguity incurs sensitivity to the power relations and inequality mechanisms that are at play in cultural collaboration.

The implications for practitioners

- HRM practitioners may benefit from working with the three perspectives of integration, differentiation and ambiguity so as to de- and reconstruct perceptions and enactments of organizational culture.
- Ambiguity can be operationalized through researcher interventions where HR practitioners and researchers collaborate to explore the dynamics and fluidities of culture in order to overcome (sub-)cultural stereotypes that bar collaboration.
- The reconstructive potential of an ambiguity analysis can lead to renewed integration – a more reflexive, dynamic and, therefore, unstable integration, but also a more hospitable and attractive integration – on which practitioners may base the development of strong organizational cultures.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Developing strong cultures that foster committed employees is central to successful HRM practice (Fombrun, 1983; Harris & Ogbonna, 1998; Schein, 1985). Concomitantly, organizational culture continues to be a central concern of HRM research (e.g., Moore, 2021), especially as it relates to occupational cultures, national cultures and other sub-cultural groupings (e.g., Drori et al., 2011; Murphy & Davey, 2002; Ogbonna & Harris, 2015). To understand the tensions between cultural unity and sub-cultural differentiation, researchers are increasingly applying an ambiguity lens (Lam, 2010; Martin, 1992; Moore, 2013), which explains the dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes that characterise negotiations of individual and collective identity in relation to organizational culture(s) (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Robertson & Swan, 2003).

Ambiguity, then, is well-established in HRM studies of organizational culture, but its potentials for HRM practice remain less developed (e.g., Ogbonna & Harris, 2002; Wankhade & Brinkman, 2014). In practice, organizational culture is often treated as a fixed and measurable concept that can be managed and controlled (Moore, 2021; Taylor et al., 2008). Taking note of this situation, Moore (2021) calls for more qualitative studies of cultural dynamics in HRM while Ogbonna and Harris (2015) invite more empirical research of inter- and intra-organizational subcultural

interaction. More specifically, Wankhade and Patniak (2020, p. 108) note that the “...growing interest in studying organizational culture is not accompanied by a strong evidence base on complexities and implications of cultural interventions in different settings.” With this paper, we respond to such calls, seeking to harness conceptualizations of cultural ambiguity for practical intervention.

To do so, we begin from a paradigmatic case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of Greenland Police, asking: *how do members of the Greenland Police understand and negotiate organizational culture?* With this question, we explore how the ambiguity perspective may help explain and strengthen organizational cultures. As we detail below, Greenland Police is a police district of the Danish Police and, hence, circumscribed by a neocolonial context. Although the occupational culture of policing is known to manifest in recognisable ways across different settings (Cockcroft, 2012; Loftus, 2009; Wankhade & Patniak, 2020), the intersection of organizational and national contexts may significantly alter the conditions for cultural articulation. The case of Greenland Police offers unique insights into the dynamic interplay between occupational and national cultures within an organizational setting, and we will focus on this interplay rather than on the involved occupational and national cultures per se.

To conduct this investigation, we (re)introduce Joanne Martin's three-dimensional framework to HRM scholars. Martin (1987; 1992; see also Meyerson & Martin, 1987) offers a meta-perspective on organizational culture that indicates how the same issues may be addressed from integration, differentiation and ambiguity perspectives. The three perspectives, she argues, are not inherent qualities of empirical organizational cultures, but different conceptualizations of such cultures. No culture is integrated, differentiated or ambiguous but can – and should – be explained along all three lines. If we are to fully understand the complexity of organizational cultures, then, we need to first recognise that culture is an analytical rather than a substantial category. As such, we need a framework that can contain and explain cultural complexities that cut across organizational and societal contexts, and the main conceptual contribution of this paper is to propose such a framework for HRM theory and practice.

As we will argue below, substantiating this framework and, hence, answering the empirical research question hinges on an ethnographic and intervention-based approach that explains how ambiguity arises in and through the dynamic interactions of different cultural and sub-cultural (national, occupational, etc.) dimensions of the organization. Pointing out the limitations of resolving cultural tensions as a choice between either one dimension or the other, we show how ambiguity can become productive for HRM research and practice, as it enables organizational members to maintain relations between differentiated subcultures *within* integrated organizational settings, thereby welcoming positions of hybridity.

Thus, the analysis illustrates the challenges that practitioners face in coming to terms with a more fluid and less measurable conceptualisation of organizational culture, but also highlights the benefits of creating room for cultural ambiguity. Through our study of integration, differentiation and ambiguity in the Greenland Police, then, we position ourselves within the growing group of HRM scholars who define culture as ambiguous (e.g., Moore, 2021; Murphy & Davey, 2002; Ogbonna & Whipp, 2006; Wankhade & Patnaik, 2020). We contribute to this work by showing that attention to integration and differentiation remains central to understanding ambiguity – especially when seeking to harness this understanding for HRM practices. Further, we illustrate how research and practice may work together to explain and enhance organizational ability to enact ambiguous cultural relations meaningfully.

2 | ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: THE THREE PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR APPLICATION IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The continued dominance of HRM practices that approach organizational culture in fixed and static terms is particularly perplexing when considering that compelling alternatives have existed for more than 3 decades. Most notably, Martin (1987, 1992) identifies three perspectives – integration, differentiation and ambiguity – and argues that the empirical phenomenon of organizational culture is multi-dimensional. Cultural analysis should not be confined to

one perspective, but must, instead, draw on and address all three in order to capture the inherent complexity of the theory and practice of organizational culture. While the integration perspective has been supplemented with both differentiation and ambiguity in scholarly work, most research continues to conceptualise and study culture in organizations from one perspective only. In what follows, we offer brief reviews of each of these mono-dimensional approaches to culture in HRM, thereby preparing the ground for their integration.

2.1 | The integration perspective in Human Resource Management

From an integration perspective culture is defined as that which people in a group or organization share. Culture implies consensus, based on common 'basic underlying assumptions' (see Schein, 1985). Much of the HRM literature on organizational culture adopts the integration perspective, concerning itself with identification and analysis of the unique cultural patterns of specific organizations (Fombrun, 1983). The implications of integration include clearly communicated organizational values that make a difference for the well-being and performance of employees (Posner et al., 1985), group-oriented organizational cultures that minimise employee turnover and have positive effects on employee performance (Mohr et al., 2012) and strong organizational cultures that support high performance work systems, leading to higher firm performance (Den Hartog & Verburg, 2004). Thus, cultural integration is an important human resource practice that ensures and enhances performance.

As Van Maanen and Barley (1985) note, organizational cultures are often established top-down, in and through the explicit efforts of managers and HR departments. Occupational cultures, however, are much more organically driven by core practitioners and key employee groups who carry the norms and values of the occupation with them and ensure the socialisation of new members into the occupational identity. Thus, organizations that are characterised by strong occupational cultures may enjoy stronger and more organic cultural integration (Posner et al., 1985; Schein, 1985), police culture being a frequently highlighted case in point (Cockcroft, 2012; Loftus, 2009; Wankhade & Patniak, 2020). Indeed, as Waddington (1999, p. 4) points out there are distinct and recognisable traits of policing, both historically and across geographical settings. This is important, as our empirical case is a policing organization where we analyse the ways in which the integrative dynamics of the dominant occupational culture interact with the differential dynamics of nationally defined sub-cultures.

As such, we begin from the basic insight that building unified organizational cultures is never an easy task (Martin, 1987; Murphy & Davey, 2002; Wankhade & Patniak, 2020). In failing to recognise the complexity of culture, the integration perspective suffers from a discrepancy between the assumption that management may control culture and the experiences of managers who find that in practice culture is uncontrollable (Ogbonna, 1992; Starbuck, 2017). Thus, the clarity and consistency offered by integration may seem attractive, but it turns out to be an oversimplification. To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of what organizational culture is and how it works, the integration perspective must be combined with other conceptual lenses.

2.2 | The differentiation perspective in Human Resource Management

The differentiation perspective is typically applied within HRM studies of the intersection between organizational and national cultures, but an important subset of such 'differentiation studies' deals critically with culture management efforts. For instance, Ogbonna and Harris (2015, p. 229) find that in their case organization '...executives' espoused aim of cultural unity was severely undermined by the differential treatment of "stars" within the team subculture and by the huge disparity in earning and other conditions between the team subculture and the administrative subculture'. Relatedly, the differentiation perspective has been used to show how certain groups of society – for example, ethnic minority groups – are disadvantaged within organizational settings (Cockcroft, 2012; Ogbonna, 2019).

Thus, the idea of shared cultural values and assumptions may mask systemic inequalities and unfairness. This is especially prevalent in multinational and/or multicultural settings, as many HR systems are Western-/ethnocentric and do not take different worldviews into account (Jackson, 2002). Acknowledging differentiated national and/or (ethnic) minority subcultures within the organizational context has been an important first step towards better and more sub-culturally sensitive management (Chen & Lin, 2013; Singh et al., 2019). This is central to our case; as a subdivision of the Danish police, the organizational culture of Greenland Police is significantly defined by the relationship between Greenlandic and Danish sub-cultures.

However, assuming that people's norms and values align neatly with their national background (or affiliation with a prevalent social group) merely reproduces cultural stability at the subcultural rather than the organizational level (Martin, 1992). This is much too simple as, for instance, Okabe (2002) shows in a study of the attitudinal differences between Japanese and British managers; while usually are ascribed to national culture, these differences decrease considerably when the managers work in the same country. Thus, national culture is not a stable entity and cannot be used as a single or simple explanatory factor for cultural differences within organizational settings. Instead, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of inter- and intra-cultural dynamics is called for (Ogbonna & Harris, 2015).

2.3 | The ambiguity perspective in Human Resource Management

While the differentiation perspective offers some nuance to the integration perspective's somewhat simplified view of organizational culture, neither perspective acknowledges the inescapable ambiguities of culture. The third perspective, which Martin initially labelled ambiguity, but later referred to as 'fragmentation' (Martin, 1992, 2002), begins from the assumption that organizational culture is inconsistent, multiple and dynamic. The concept of ambiguity is, in itself, ambiguous, which may explain why Martin opted for the alternative label of fragmentation in her later work on the three perspectives. This enables her to discuss how ambiguity is considered across the three perspectives: the integration perspective excludes it, the differentiation perspective channels it outside subcultures and the fragmentation perspective acknowledges ambiguity (Martin, 2002, p. 95).

We are interested in the cross-cutting character of ambiguity, especially as it manifests within and between integration and differentiation. Focussing on ambiguity (and maintaining the term) enables us to attend to the shifting inter-relations between organizations and environments as these relate to individual organizational members' multiple and fluid understandings of themselves vis-à-vis the organization. In foregrounding the dynamic interrelations of culture(s) and identity/-ies, we pursue the conceptualizations and applications of cultural ambiguity, as developed within the HRM literature, rather than the understanding of ambiguity that is directly associated with Martin's fragmentation perspective.

As Ogbonna and Whipp (2006) observe, managers' expectations of organizational culture usually fall within the integration category, but what actually happens in organizations is more closely aligned with – and, hence, may be better explained from – the ambiguity perspective. Working from an ambiguity perspective, however, does not exclude integration and differentiation. Rather, as Moore (2021) shows in a study of a multi-national merger, ambiguity may enable different national cultures to become integrative forces in creating new organizational culture(s) (see also, Gerhart & Fang, 2005; Ge & Zhao, 2020).

In sum, the ambiguity perspective recognises that managing culture is not an isolated practice; it is never uniform nor is it ever 'done'. In what follows, we will detail the methodological considerations involved in an organizational analysis that suggests the productive potential of ambiguity within and across cultural integration and subcultural differentiation.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Seeking to advance ambiguity as a productive negotiation of integration and differentiation, we turn to a critical ethnography of Greenland Police. Van Maanen (2011) defines organizational ethnography as the documentation of

participant observations in the field. Critical ethnography requires (self)reflection (Cunliffe, 2003; Gilmore et al., 2015) and includes practical interventions (e.g., Holck, 2018; Yanow, 2012). Such interventions can be both affirmative and subversive, offering solutions to issues raised by organizational members and problematizations of that which the organization takes for granted. In what follows, we detail how we supplement the collection and analysis of ethnographic data with a practical intervention in the field, but first we present the historical and political context for the current organization of Greenland Police.

3.1 | Context of the case study

Greenland Police is defined by the colonial relationship between Greenland and Denmark, which dates back more than six centuries and has only recently begun to shift. In 2008, a majority of the Greenlandic people voted for full autonomy from Denmark. Since then, Greenland has been working towards this goal, but, as of 2022, Denmark still contributes a block grant of more than half of Greenland's national budget. Greenland also continues to be subject to Danish law in the areas of foreign and defence policy and accepts Danish enforcement of certain areas of jurisdiction. For instance, Greenland neither has its own military nor an independent police force. Greenland Police, therefore, is organised as a police district of the Danish Police.

The Greenlandic Chief of Police reports to the Danish Minister of Justice, and the governance of the Greenlandic legal system remains within the purview of the Danish Parliament. The Greenlandic police force is composed of approximately two-thirds 'Greenlandic' police officers and one-third 'Danish' police officers. This distinction is, as we will show analytically, problematic in several respects, but it works as short-hand for a distinction that is readily recognized and reproduced within the organization. A few of the Danish officers have lived in Greenland most of their lives, but the majority are in Greenland on shorter stays, either on 2-year contracts or on four-to 6-month summer assistance assignments.

Since the total population of Greenland is only around 56,000 people, with almost 20,000 living in the capital Nuuk, most police stations, have less than 10 officers employed in total, many only one or two. Adding to this rather isolated situation is the fact that no two cities in Greenland are connected with roads or rails; you can only travel between them by plane, helicopter, boat, dog sled or snow scooter. Furthermore, the official working language of the police force is Danish, but a large part of the Greenlandic population speaks little or no Danish. Conversely, other groups, including many Danish expatriates as well as some Greenlanders with mixed family backgrounds, do not speak Greenlandic. This means that police stations are not only isolated from each other, but that police officers are also often set apart from the communities they serve.

The historical context and present circumstances of Greenland Police are what make this organization a particularly interesting case for the study of negotiations of (integrated) occupational culture among organizational members with different (and differentiated) national backgrounds. Further, as our engagement with the case developed, it also became illustrative of the conceptual as well as practical potential of framing such negotiation in terms of ambiguity.

3.2 | Data collection

Our study of Greenland Police began in February 2015, when the Chief of Police in Greenland granted us access to police stations and encouraged his employees to make themselves available for interviews. This enabled the two first authors, who undertook all empirical research for this paper, to conduct an anthropologically driven data collection with a very open approach to the field. Further, the Chief of Police did not have any expectations nor requests regarding themes, results or the like, but supported our scientific freedom and trusted us to substantiate our findings.

TABLE 1 Overview of empirical material

Observations	Training course in Denmark (6 days, Feb 2015), fieldwork in Greenland (13 days, Aug 2015)
Interviews	With officers working permanently and temporarily in Greenland (13 during fieldwork, 12 before/after)
Interventions	Training course in Denmark (2 days, Feb 2016), leadership seminar in Greenland (3 days, Nov 2016)

Since we are based in Denmark, the fieldwork began with the Danish officers who, because of shortage of Greenlandic officers, are sent to Greenland on shorter or longer assignments. The data collection covered a full circle of deployment; we observed their preparatory training, interviewed a number of Danish officers and their Greenlandic colleagues prior to, during and after their time in Greenland. And we joined them in Greenland for 13 days of participant observations. This fieldwork was documented in approximately 60 pages of notes and 13 recorded interviews, lasting between one and two and a half hours. Before and after the observations, 12 additional interviews with officers all over Greenland were conducted via a satellite link from the main police station in Copenhagen. All interviews were conducted in Danish and translated by the authors.

The following year, we were invited back to the preparatory course to continue our observations, but also to run a workshop, which meant that our initial findings became part of the training for the group of officers going to Greenland in the summer of 2016. In November 2016, the Chief of Police invited us back to Greenland to report on the research and conduct an intervention. The 33 most senior managers of Greenland Police participated in the intervention, which was incorporated as a 1-day element of a week-long leadership meeting. We were invited to observe another full day of this meeting where two representatives from the central HR department of the police force presented a report on the organizational culture of the police (meaning, the entire Danish police). Just as we had done at the preparatory course, we designed our feedback to the leadership group as an intervention based on our ethnographic data. These two interventions are key moments in our research process and central elements of our empirical material. Further, they highlight the practicality of our approach (see Table 1 for an overview of the empirical material).

3.3 | Analytical strategy

The analysis relies on the interviews and observations as well as the intervention data from the leadership seminar and proceeds in two main steps. First, we establish the predominant interpretations of an integrated police culture and differentiated national cultures as these emerged in our initial coding of the interviews and observations and were articulated at the leadership seminar. Second, we turn to seminar participants' negotiation of their relationships with these two cultural dimensions as facilitated by our intervention.

Here, we explicitly introduced Martin's three perspectives. In the subsequent discussion many participants found that the integration and differentiation perspectives could not stand alone in explaining the culture of Greenland Police and, instead, moved towards identifying themselves and the organization with ambiguity. Thus, the participants became actively involved in the analysis, as they reflected upon our initial results, complicating integration and differentiation narratives through their own ambiguous relationships with various sub-cultures and with the organizational whole.

4 | ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES IN GREENLAND POLICE

We begin the analysis by focussing on integration and differentiation as separate perspectives, then seek to ingrate the two under the auspices of ambiguity in a second analytical round. Thereby, we not only illustrate the analytical pertinence of the multi-dimensional approach but also its practical appeal.

4.1 | Occupational integration and national differentiation

In our preliminary work with Greenland Police, we found an organization that, while clearly integrated around the occupational culture of police work, was profoundly split along fault-lines of differentiated national subcultures. In what follows, we provide brief presentations of these initial findings.

4.1.1 | Integration around occupational purpose

The strong occupational police culture is present at all times, especially in statements by top management. In our interview with one of the top managers, he said:

We are first and foremost one police force ...and it's strategically important that we view ourselves as one.

(Greenlandic Police Manager A)

Another top manager explains his way into the police force:

I was just a boy when I entered the force, I was 22, so it's always been police, police, police.

(Greenlandic Police Manager B)

With statements like these, our informants are on par with studies of police culture that highlight the unity of the force, emphasising how early socialisation ensures strong integration (e.g., Charman, 2017; Cockroft, 2012). During our observations we also saw evidence of this unified culture on a daily basis. For example, we noticed the way in which the atmosphere changed as soon as officers received an emergency call, went on patrol or otherwise shifted into 'police mode'. No matter what individual officers were occupied with, the shift instantly brought them together as a group.

At the leadership seminar, participants corroborated the unifying force of the police culture, but also mentioned the context of Greenland. When asked to work together in groups to reflect on what unites the organization, many participants brought up organizational values and core tasks, which Greenland Police holds in common with other districts of the Danish police, but one group reported:

...isolated is maybe not the right word, but in Greenland we are far away from everybody or rather, from the police in Denmark, and we have to stick together and work on the common project.

Somewhat ironically, then, one uniting force of Greenland Police is its differentiation from the organization of which it is part. Further, this split between Denmark and Greenland does not just unite the Greenlandic police force, but is, as we shall see, also a main source of differentiation within it.

4.1.2 | Differentiation through national stereotypes

The Denmark–Greenland differentiation establishes difference along very stereotypical lines of national culture, where the Greenlandic culture is described as primitive and in touch with nature and the Danish as civilised and efficient. Brought into the organizational culture of police work, the stereotypical perceptions of Greenlandic culture translate into stories about a lack of work ethic:

Both their work ethic and pace are very different to what I am used to in Denmark. Things are much slower here compared to Denmark. So, I had to get used to working in a lower gear and not get annoyed at how slow and inefficient they are.

(Summer assistant A)

Further, cultural differences are often articulated as deficiencies on the part of Greenlanders who are perceived by Danish officers as not having the necessary professional qualifications:

It's the way reports are written. It's just not detailed enough. It's about having pride in what you do. I mean, it's not like they are not proud of what they do, but it is really not good work, there is just a different perception of standard.

(Summer assistant B)

Conversely, the stereotype of Danish efficiency translates into stories of loud and arrogant control freaks:

You can recognise a Dane by the fact that they talk loudly and a lot. We Greenlanders talk more quietly together. When two Danish colleagues greet each other, it all becomes very technical, 'where have you served' and such. They try to find something they have in common and then they have a point of departure.

(Greenlandic officer A)

While the Greenlandic culture is placed at a distance from the organizational context, the Danish culture is seen to be better aligned with the professional police culture, but not with the particular context of Greenland. For instance, language is a major issue, as one Greenlandic officer explains:

We [the Greenlanders] have to translate for them [the Danish officers] all the time, and they don't feel too good about that. Everything they write, comes from our mouth.

(Greenlandic officer B)

The language issue and other questions of local knowledge threaten the competency of Danish officers, but these challenges only add to a highly differentiated organizational culture. Despite identifying with the common category of 'police', individual police officers are placed in stereotyped subcultural categories of 'Danish' or 'Greenlandic', which makes collaboration between them difficult.

The stereotypical representations on which the predominant differentiation is based incur a lack of involvement between the two groups. As one Danish officer, who is permanently stationed in Greenland, explains:

You can see, when the Danes arrive [in Greenland], they behave just like the foreigners in Denmark. They get together in groups who refer to each other and are only social with other Danes.

(Danish officer A)

This segregation is also enforced from the Greenlandic side, as getting to know people who are only there on short-term contracts can be hard. In the words of a senior Greenlandic officer:

I've made connections with at least 50 people, Danish officers, some I've become really close with, and then they leave, and you get kind of disappointed that it's the same record being played every summer.

You use a lot of resources on a person, personally and professionally, and when it's really fun and up and running, then they leave.

(Greenlandic officer D)

We observed differentiation play out physically in many different interactions between Danish and Greenlandic police officers, most specifically in the lunchrooms of all the stations we visited. Here is one representative example from our field notes:

When we get back from the patrol, it's lunch time. We [the two researchers] sit down and people who enter the room stand around restlessly. We ask if we've taken someone's seat, and they say that there isn't a fixed seating, they just know where they usually sit. We move to seats that we sense are not 'taken' – at the centre. Then the Greenlandic officers sit down at one end of the table, and the Danish ones at the other.

What is particularly interesting about this scene is that it was literally played back to us during the intervention. We had asked the participants to create and perform a role play of their organizational culture and one group chose this exact scenario – placing Greenlandic officers at one end of the table at which they sat mumbling quietly about fishing and hunting while the Danish officers at the other end talked loudly, bragging about their professional conquests. The play was clearly recognisable to all participants who laughed and cheered at the performance. As the laughter died down, however, the scene also gave pause for reflection.

4.1.3 | Clashes between integration and differentiation

Bringing together the accounts of feeling part of an integrated occupational culture while also belonging to differentiated national cultures, we predominantly found expressions of deep frustration; of longing to be but failing to become recognized as 'both'; for example, both a competent police officer and a Greenlander or both a Danish officer on a short-term contract and someone the Greenlanders on the force would care to spend time with and invest in emotionally. In an interview, one Greenlandic officer expressed the frustration poignantly:

I am sick and tired of the stereotypes and all their Greenland jokes: that we are drunk all the time, lazy and all that. When they say these things, I just sit there and think 'shut up'!

(Greenlandic officer E)

Our interviews and observations predominantly established the relationship between occupational integration and national differentiation as conflicted shifts between the two dimensions. That is, Greenlanders' experiences of 'truly belonging' to the occupational culture might be briefly sustained, but then ruptured by the (re-)introduction of subcultural differentiation. Similarly, Danish officers' feelings of being accepted in the Greenlandic context would constantly be challenged by new experiences of not 'fitting in'. For instance, one Greenlandic officer shared a story of a Danish colleague who he characterised as 'more Greenlandic than me', but also as someone everybody noticed:

A Dane who runs around with a dog sled... not many do that.

(Greenlandic officer F)

In sum, relations between integration and differentiation are experienced as clashes, with organizational members being unable to sustain different positions simultaneously, but instead shifting abruptly between positions of integration and differentiation. While this may indicate that the occupational culture of policing is not as integrated as it appears, differentiation is, in this case, predominantly a power play. The constant alignment of 'police' with

'Danish' creates a double bind for anyone who wishes to be recognized as 'Greenlandic police', but it also makes it difficult for Danish officers to become recognized as anything but their profession within the Greenlandic context. It simply is very difficult to be both.

4.2 | Introducing cultural ambiguity

Hoping to use our findings to provide Greenland Police with possibilities to work constructively with its cultural tensions, we were excited to be invited to the most senior officers' leadership seminar. As mentioned, we introduced Martin's three perspectives during the seminar, seeking to provide the officers with a new vocabulary for speaking about organizational culture. Following our presentation, the participants were divided into groups of four or five officers who discussed a selection of quotes and notes from our interviews and observations, including those analysed above. This led to lively debate about how a deeply differentiated culture obstructs more nuanced, inclusive and productive ways of perceiving each other and collaborating on a daily basis. The following analysis is based on that debate and the quotes stem from the groups' reports – and, therefore, are not attributed to individual respondents.

4.2.1 | Breaking down subcultural stereotypes

When the officers began to unpack their experiences of cultural differentiation, it became increasingly difficult for them to uphold the notion of two separate, overarching subcultures, as plural and complex cross-cutting alliances were articulated and became increasingly salient. The manager from one of the larger stations, for instance, introduced a differentiation within Greenlandic culture:

I think it is interesting to talk about culture and subculture, when you consider the Danish and Greenlandic culture. But I get a lot of assistants from villages on the coast. It makes me think about how there are a lot of different cultures. Even though they are Greenlandic officers, it is another culture, and even though we are from the same country there are still a lot of things we need to explain and introduce to them.

As a result of the cultural and geographical differences between people in Greenland, the culture of people from Nuuk (the capital), this participant went on to say, holds more similarities with Danish culture than with 'village culture', which he thought characterised most of the rest of the country.

The identification of Nuuk with Danish culture disturbed the otherwise fixed Denmark–Greenland differentiation and caused some participants to express resistance to the stereotypes. For example, when a participant was asked what he wanted to show a guest to exemplify the culture he identifies with, he promptly answered:

I would show you what I eat, what is in my freezer. I have pork, beef and frozen vegetables. [By doing that] I would try to remove some of the stereotypes, which have been placed on us.

Identifying as Greenlandic, but displaying what he frames as Danish eating habits, the officer tries to counter stereotypical images – not only of what Greenlanders eat, but of who they are. Here, the participant upholds the binary division (represented by Danish vs. Greenlandic food), but he also opens up the possibility of identifying as Greenlandic while having Danish eating habits. Thus, he actively resists Greenlandic stereotypes and blurs the cultural divide. Other Greenlandic officers expressed resistance to the stereotypes by disavowing activities like hiking and hunting, not displaying care for nature and/or not drinking alcohol. In these ways, the (self-identified) Greenlandic officers at the seminar actively built anti-stereotypes, but still clearly and proudly identified as Greenlandic.

This first step of countering and dismantling stereotypes enabled multiple and fluid definitions of and identifications with Greenlandic culture, which promoted further negotiations of identification with the cultures of 'Greenland' and 'police'.

During the seminar, the simple differentiation along the line of national culture was also complicated by the emergence of other subcultures. In the following quote, one group reports back from a discussion on subcultures:

There are a lot of subcultures both across leadership levels, organizational levels, geography and many other things. And we are all part of many different subcultures: you are a part of your family, colleagues, friends, you have a job, a nationality and many other things. And this acknowledgement gave us a better idea of how this shapes us and how we react in different social relations.

To the officers, awareness of belonging to several subcultures highlights how they share different commonalities with different people; this was not something they had considered previously, and they were amused by the idea of finding 'alternative communities'. For example, the subculture of 'smokers' came up time and again and seemed to override otherwise strong cultural distinctions, whether this was the Greenland/Denmark differentiation or distinctions along professional lines. In fact, this was a recurrent scene in our observations, as police officers, lawyers and administrative staff would talk freely when sharing a cigarette break, exemplifying Ogbonna and Harris' (2002) conceptualization of organizational cultures as defined by multiple differentiations, which interact dynamically.

4.2.2 | Identifying with ambiguity

The discussion of multiple, fragmented and fluid identities became a pivotal event at the leadership seminar; as many participants spoke up to identify themselves as 'hybrids', they acknowledged, accepted and even began to accentuate ambiguities within their personal identities. Due to a long history of relationships between Greenlanders and Northern Europeans, a large part of Greenland's population has 'mixed' cultural/racial backgrounds; however, it was not until we explicitly introduced the vocabulary of ambiguity that the officers linked this fact to themselves and their cultural positions within Greenland Police. Once the link was made, however, it turned out that most of the officers identified ambiguously with the available subcultural positions, problematising the differentiation between them.

Identification with a position of in-betweenness rather than belonging firmly to one culture was grounded in various factors like marriage and time spent in Greenland. Yet the most vividly discussed ambiguous experience was that of racial hybridity, which was expressed as a paradoxical position, both enhancing and limiting access to cultural resources. One participant opened up this discussion by sharing his own experience:

I am half Danish and half Greenlandic. I speak both Danish and Greenlandic almost fluently. I understand Danish and Greenlandic humour – and the Greenlandic mindset. We have several [people of mixed race] in our community who do not speak Greenlandic; they definitely face a cultural dilemma, as they do not understand the everyday jokes in Greenlandic. You miss a lot when you are not 100% into the Greenlandic way of life, and you have to be able to understand the Danish mindset.

As the quote indicates, the position of cultural/racial hybridity is inherently ambiguous, creating multiple relations of belonging while obstructing full inclusion in any one context.

From the position of 'in-between', it is particularly difficult to know what it would take to fit in – and to be certain that one has succeeded in this regard. One may learn the language or come to 'know the mindset', but

other factors remain beyond one's control. Skin colour is one such factor, as another participant succinctly points out:

I am what I call a bastard [i.e., mixed race; the term is not as loaded in Danish as it is in English]; I am mixed Greenlandic and Danish. And I have always all through my childhood been told: 'You have more light skin than us, so you are more Danish than us.' They tried to exclude me, push me out. But I have always felt: 'You know what, I am Greenlandic.' I still feel that, and when I speak Greenlandic, I make sure to have and use a broader vocabulary than others. I've made an effort to be better at speaking Greenlandic [than other Greenlanders].

Thus, being of mixed race may cause a feeling of exclusion from the Greenlandic society. However, ambiguously positioned officers are not entirely included in the Danish subculture either as a third 'racial hybrid' explained:

I am so lucky – or unfortunate – to have a foot in each camp. So, Danish officers quite often say to me, 'You think Danish', and then they put me into the 'Danish box'. But I am not completely there, I have become their jester, and then, 'Presto!' – they have a Greenlandic friend.

Having a 'foot in each camp', makes this officer more 'accessible' to or easily befriended by Danish officers. However, playing the role of 'the Greenlandic friend' positions the mixed-race officer ambiguously in relation to Danish *and* Greenlandic colleagues. To the former, he is an outsider who is inside, whereas the latter perceive him as an insider who is outside.

At the leadership seminar, statements like those quoted here inspired others to engage in similar acts of sharing, leading to a general discussion of the frustrations involved in belonging to 'both camps'. This, in turn, brought about reflections on the potentially positive outcomes of such ambiguity. Here, a fourth self-identified 'hybrid' adds how 'having a foot' in each culture could be used to build bridges between Danish and Greenlandic officers:

Both [officer's name] and I are hybrids and have one foot in Denmark, one foot in Greenland. And we need to be better at being transmitters. A Danish person expects an invitation before he goes anywhere, whereas talking about something would be an invitation to a Greenlandic person. So, if [officer] and I sit at lunch and talk about going to my secret fishing place at the weekend, which we often do, a Danish person would feel he was intruding, if he asked if he could join. But our [Greenlanders'] expectation is that if someone wants to go, they should just say so. Because we have plenty of space and everyone is welcome. But the new Danish colleague probably sits there with envy and really wants to join, but he would never say anything.

In the subsequent discussion several other officers (re-)articulated connectivity across languages and cultural differences as a positive resource. One said:

We have a role in many different subcultures, so they don't make sense as closed spaces. And they influence each other dynamically.

And, offering a succinct summary of what had been shared, another participant observed:

Subcultures and one's roles in them influence each other; they are more fluid than we think.

As such, the discussion resulted, first, in recognition that most of the officers in one way or another identified ambiguously with the two dominant national subcultures, leading them to reconsider their relationship with the integrated occupational culture of policing and the corporate culture of the Danish police. Second, this initial recognition

led participants to become aware of several other subcultural groupings and to consider how they were able to shift between them. Third, they articulated the fluidity of their own identities and used it as a starting point for negotiating the ambiguities of the organizational culture; neither is ever fixed but is always in the mode of becoming. In sum, embracing ambiguity opened up new avenues of relating to each other and of collaboratively reconstructing the organizational culture.

4.2.3 | Ambiguous cultural relations

As the top managers of Greenland Police engaged actively with their own ambiguous positions and became able to negotiate the tenacious relationships between an integrated occupational culture and differentiated national subcultures, ambiguity became available to them as a resource for organizational leadership and, hence, for organizational change. Most notably, the officers created meeting grounds for integration and differentiation; their ambiguous positions could neither be understood nor maintained without the more stable categories (of occupational culture and national subcultures), but ambiguity also opened these categories up from within and in relation to each other. Put simply, it became possible to identify as 'Greenlandic' and 'police' in new and nonexclusive ways just as 'Greenlandic' values and behaviours became available to 'Danish' officers.

This enhanced the participants' practical ability to work with the organizational culture of Greenland Police, and the experience furthered our understanding of ambiguity as a theoretical concept. Thus, ambiguity emerges from and is articulated in negotiations of the relations between integrated and differentiated identities in organizational contexts – and enables such cultural identities to co-exist, at the individual as well as the organizational levels of analysis. Ambiguity enables individual organizational members to bridge different identities, making it possible for them to envision a new organizational whole that not only tolerates but actively supports the unique positions of all its members.

5 | CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Working with the case of Greenland Police, we have illustrated the benefits of including the dimension of ambiguity in the study and practice of HRM. Understanding organizational culture only through integration and/or differentiation is limited in the sense that both of these perspectives present partial and overly stabilised explanations that cannot account for indeterminate cultural relations (Martin, 1987; Murphy & Davey, 2002; Wankhade & Patniak, 2020). Whereas applying the differentiation perspective can include integration as part of a cultural analysis, only the ambiguity perspective can encompass all three dimensions. This means that conducting cultural analyses that account for ambiguity (rather than attempting to eradicate it) is paramount for the advancement of HRM studies of organizational culture, but it also means that such analyses must not forget about integration and differentiation. Like Moore (2021), our analysis clearly shows how ambiguity does not dissolve the tensions between integration and differentiation, but, instead, makes these tensions productive for the inclusion of different identity positions within one organizational culture. Thus, adding to Moore's (2021) conclusions, we show how the reconstructive potential of ambiguity can lead to renewed cultural integration – a more reflexive, dynamic and, therefore, unstable integration, but also a more hospitable and attractive integration on which practitioners may base the development of organizational cultures – and subcultures – that are as strong as they claim to be. And, significantly, that can accommodate both integration and differentiation at one and the same time – and in temporally prolonged relations.

As our case indicates, introducing cultural ambiguity to HRM entails closer integration of analysis and practice, since scholars and practitioners join forces to not only deconstruct existing cultural myths of stability, but also identify the ambiguities upon which cultural reconstruction may be most productively based. Thus, we do not mean to discredit HRM studies that are conducted from a pure integration or differentiation perspective, but to advance

studies of cultural ambiguity that integrate insights from the other two analytical dimensions (e.g., Lam, 2010; Murphy & Davey, 2002; Wankhade & Patniak, 2020). Ultimately, our aim is not to promote ambiguity alone, but to forward a multidimensional framework that enhances the relationality of Martin's (1992) three perspectives. As such, we offer four distinct, but interrelated contributions:

First, we contribute conceptually to the use of Martin's three perspectives within HRM research on organizational culture by unpacking how the three perspectives relate to each other. Thus, integration studies do not usually acknowledge differences and ambiguities, and differentiation studies tend to focus on differences between integrated subcultures. Conversely, ambiguity studies are prone to neglect integration as well as differentiation, focussing, instead, on multifarious and fleeting dynamics. Our framework, to the contrary, takes seriously Martin's admonition to use all three perspectives. To this end, we revert to the label of ambiguity for the third perspective (which Martin calls fragmentation in her later work) and show how ambiguity both exists within and between integration and differentiation. Thus, we argue, ambiguity is not an independent category, but one that is negotiated in relation to the other two, thereby opening up integration and differentiation to ambiguity. The consequence is that organizational cultures are never fully stable nor entirely malleable but are repeated in and through negotiations of their members' (sub-)cultural positions (occupational, national, etc.) inside and outside of the organization.

Second, we join Moore (2021), Ogbonna and Harris (2015) and Wankhade and Patniak (2020) in suggesting a methodological shift towards more intervention-based, qualitative research of culture, as ambiguity between different people's statements, ambiguity within individual accounts and/or ambiguity between the statements and actions of interviewees can best be observed through in-depth study. Such ambiguity is, as we have shown, likely to appear as frustration if organizational members are unable to articulate and/or inhabit ambiguities. Interventions, like the one presented in this article, enable practitioners and researchers to collaboratively explore the dynamics and fluidities of culture in order to offer alternatives to national, racial, gender-based, professional, generational or classed stereotypes that often hinder organizational integration in contexts that are defined by multiple (sub-)cultures (see also Kamenou, 2007; Ogbonna, 2019). In our case, the viable alternative took the form of a shift from exclusionary categories towards recognition of embodied experiences of multiple belongings across the divides of organizational culture and subculture as well as between different subcultural positions. Simply put, understanding how the same person may, variously, belong to the occupational culture of policing, the organizational culture of the police as well as to various subcultures (e.g., Danish, smoker, hunter) not only opens up the organization to cultural multiplicity, but also complicates easy alignments between individual and collective positions. This, in turn, begins the process of nuancing cultural stereotypes (making room for 'Danish' hunters and 'Greenlandic' police officers) and strengthening hybrid positions ('Greenlandic Danes' and 'Danish Greenlanders'). Whether this might, eventually, dissolve national stereotypes, remains an open question, but one towards which we are somewhat pessimistically inclined, since the colonial history, with its ingrained asymmetries and hierarchies, continues to shape the relationship between Greenland and Denmark, generally, and between members of Greenland Police, more specifically.

The third contribution of our multi-dimensional analysis is enhanced attention to context, which also implies that our work does not offer generalisable substantial insights. Rather, we have developed a conceptual starting point for conducting the analysis anew in each new organizational context. Police organizations are typically defined by important differentiations between occupations (Charman, 2017; Cockroft, 2012), but in our case these are less relevant, because the small stations and huge distances of Greenland mean that police officers are often the only present professionals just as the national differentiation often overrides the occupational one. Hence, Greenlandic and Danish police officers are nationally differentiated before they are occupationally integrated and, conversely, Danish police officers and Danish lawyers who work in Greenland Police often come to identify with each other.

Further, the organization of Greenland Police is integrated in and through its differentiation from the Danish police force, despite its nominal integration as a part of this larger organization. But the Danish-Greenlandic dichotomy was productively complicated when key organizational members self-identified as cultural hybrids and spoke up about the ways in which they embody and experience ambiguity. This moment became pivotal to harnessing the

multidimensional framework for the production of a stronger organizational culture in our particular case. Other organizations, surely, will experience other tensions and must encounter different means of making them productive. Thus, our case shows us that there are no short-cuts to the insights that the leading officers of Greenland Police developed at the seminar. To become able to negotiate ambiguity meaningfully, every organization must identify its own ambiguous potentials. With the multi-dimensional framework along with the interventionist approach we offer a means of doing so; it is a learning process rather than a substantial solution.

Our fourth and final contribution begins from the sobering observation that bringing in ambiguity is not a quick fix to the challenges that HRM scholars experience in defining and mobilising a meaningful concept of organizational culture. Rather, embracing ambiguity necessitates a difficult move from a basic conception of organizational stability to a much more dynamic perception of culture (Wang et al., 2009). Indeed, a perception of the organizational culture, its context as well as its members as always-in-the-making, will fundamentally change the self-perceived role of HRM in terms of working with culture.

Reorientation towards the ambiguities of cultural change not only demands reconsideration of the integration perspective on culture but also calls the differentiation perspective into question. What we found in the seminar with the leaders of Greenland Police, however, is that introducing ambiguity does not make integration and differentiation disappear. Rather, it offers productive relations between the two, opening up spaces for being 'different together'. Beginning from this (re-)conceptualization of cultural ambiguity as the dynamic relationality between integrated and differentiated organizational members, future intervention studies could enhance the conceptual understanding of – and practical ability to – neither viewing oneself as (part of) a fixed entity nor assuming such stability on the part of others. This will enable organizational cultures to grow stronger in and through their negotiations of ambiguity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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