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**Author(s):** Halttunen, Leena

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**Whose culture? Monolithic cultures and subcultures in early childhood settings**

**Leena Halttunen**

## **Abstract**

In Finland, day care centre directors have traditionally led only a single unit, but after the recent merging of many units, most directors simultaneously lead several, physically separate units. These organizations are called distributed organizations. This study was carried out in two distributed day care organizations. The findings are based on interviews with and observations of the staff members. When organizational mergers occur, they raise questions about culture (van Maanen and Barley, 1985). The findings show that part of the culture should have been shared by all members across the organization, but staff also emphasized the importance of subcultures. Two of Martin and Meyerson's (1987) paradigms were found to exist in parallel: integration and differentiation.

## **Key words**

Organizational culture, subcultures, integration, differentiation, distributed organizations, leadership

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on my dissertation (reference withheld, 2009), in which I explored day care work and leadership in a distributed organization in an early childhood context. In this study, the term distributed organization refers to an organization where a single director leads at least two day care units (e.g., Vartiainen et al., 2004). In such an organization, the day care units are situated physically apart and each unit may offer different kinds of day care services (day care centre, family day care and open day care). The study aimed to describe day care work and professional relationships in a day care setting, and to investigate how leadership in day care was carried out and what was expected from the leadership. The present case study of two distributed organizations takes an ethnographic approach. One organization comprised four units and the other unit had five. The number of employees in these organizations consisted of two directors and 48 staff members.

In Finland, day care centre directors have traditionally led only a single day care centre. The first significant change in leadership arrangements occurred at the end of the 1980s when directors started to lead both family day care and day care centres. During the 1990s, the smaller day care units were merged with the larger ones. These mergers were the beginning of multiunit organizations, making them the first steps towards distributed organizations in

day care. The change has been rapid. According to Nivala (1999), about 30% of day care directors in Finland worked as administrators only, with no kindergarten teaching duties. This figure can be compared to the percentage of directors in 2007 (72%) who simultaneously led both day care centres and family day care (Alila and Parrila, 2007). Over the last decade, the responsibilities of directors have shifted almost completely. Whereas earlier most of the directors led a single day care centre and had duties with children, today most directors focus on leadership and run several units. In other words, because of these leadership arrangements most day care organizations now consist of several units, some of them newly founded or some older.

In this study I adhered to no specific organizational or leadership theory. The research task was based on the idea that multiple theories of organizations and leadership could co-exist (Morgan, 1998; Yukl, 2002). Nevertheless, in different periods, different theories and approaches to organizations and to leadership have dominated regarding the favored organizational structure. A distributed organization can be seen as a postmodern organization in which, for example, trust, a low hierarchy, and democracy are central (Clegg, 1990). In this study, leadership was seen from a similar perspective: the personnel and the director co-constructed leadership and both were able to take leadership roles (Shamir, 2007).

Although my purpose was not to directly study organizational culture or measure it, I was aware that cultural questions are important, especially when organizations are merged. Van Maanen and Barely (1985, p. 41) note that “acquisitions and mergers are obvious examples where the creation of subcultures is sudden and swift.” As mentioned, in distributed organizations the units are physically separate. According to Schein (1993), several organizations often break down into subunits, for example, based on geographical distance. This distance is one reason why cultural issues and the creation of subcultures become important. In the present study, questions about, for example, belonging to the work organization were included in the data collection from the beginning. When organizational changes of this kind (i.e., unit mergers) occur, they may also have far-reaching cultural effects that go beyond what is anticipated.

Distributed organizations can be established in various ways: by merging old units or by merging new units with old ones. In the case organizations, the units were merged mainly because of the need to restructure the leadership arrangements, but both merging paths were present. Already existing units were merged and newly founded units were merged to already existing units. Despite how distributed organizations are created, mergers may bring up cultural questions. De Witte and van Muijen (1999: 585) note that “when starting up a new organization, individuals have to find solutions for problems and have to work out methods

and systems for an efficient daily functioning of the organization.” In the present study, although some of the units were old ones and some already existed, these two case organizations were considered to be new ones.

## **Organizational culture and subcultures**

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant amount of research on organizational culture. According to Hatch (1997), what we can find are some key symbols, but for which each organizational member imparts a different meaning. Schein (2004) proposes a model of culture with three levels: artefacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. Artefacts are those things we see and hear. However, if an observer’s view is based on artefacts only, it is difficult to make conclusions about how they reflect underlying assumptions. Beliefs, values, and especially assumptions are so taken for granted that members of the group have difficulty expressing them and researchers have trouble examining them. According to De Witte and van Muijen (1999), the aim of the research depends on who is researching. Researchers are mainly interested in the understanding and measurement of organizational culture. Practitioners use measures as a means to know the culture. For consultants, the focus is measuring how to change the culture.

Defining the concept of organizational culture is not easy. Hatch (1997) suggests, it is perhaps the most difficult of all organizational concepts to define. The definition of culture is often based on the assumption that certain things – such as rules, values, thoughts, and behavior – are commonly held by a group of people. Culture is a collective phenomenon rooted in a group rather than based on individuals (Hatch, 1997; Sackmann, 2001). Hatch (1997) stresses how central the notion of sharing has been in the development of the concept of organizational culture. When we try to study these shared meanings, it is, however, difficult to find them.

Culture researchers should define their own understanding of organizational culture. If shared meaning is a central aspect of organizational culture, one needs to define, for example, when something is shared. Is something shared when everyone in an organization shares the same meaning, or is it possible that the meaning is not the same for all members? Meyerson and Martin (1987; see also Martin, 1992; 2002) offer a three-perspective framework on organizational culture: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. Meyerson and Martin call these three views of culture as paradigms.

The key words in the integration paradigm are consistency, consensus, and, quite often, leader-centeredness. Consistency and consensus can be seen at different levels of the organization's hierarchy, and different manifestations of culture are consistent with each



other. In other words, for example, abstract values are evident in real life. In this paradigm, the importance of the leader as a creator of culture is emphasized (Meyerson and Martin, 1987). In sum, the definition of culture is very clear because it is monolithic and is shared by all members of a group.

For example Schein (2004) among several other researchers advocates the unitary, integrated approach to culture. Schein (2004: 17) defines the culture of a group as a “pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” Different cultures also easily acquire a label, and can be called, for example, networked, fragmented, mercenary, or communal (Goffee and Jones, 2001). These labels and classifications also suggest that, in a single organization, culture is somehow unified. These labels make it sound as if culture stays as it is – strong or weak – without a possibility for change.

According to Meyerson and Martin (1987), in the differentiation paradigm culture is composed of a collection of values and there may be a range of subcultures and subunits. Culture can be shared only among the members of a subunit but not between different subunits, although there is also a dominant culture. This may mean disagreements between

different subunits as well as cultural manifestations. In contrast to integration, researchers are interested in inconsistencies, lack of consensus, and non-leader-centered sources. Organizational culture is influenced from both inside and outside.

Also other authors have emphasized the existence of subcultures in organizations. Subcultures have been built, for example, around occupational groups (Gregory, 1983) or professional identification (Sackmann, 1992). In schools, like in any other organization, there are subcultures (Lahtero and Risku, 2012). Van Maanen and Barley (1985: 38) define organizational subcultures “as a subset of an organization’s members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group within the organization, share a set of problems commonly defined to be the problems of all, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understanding unique to the group.” What is interesting in this definition is that a group identifies itself as being a distinct group. The meaning of subcultures has also been examined in research on the implementation of development projects (Huang et al., 2003) and on problem solving in relation to the environment of an organization (Howard-Grenville, 2006). In these studies it was evident that the implementation of development and problem solving varied in different subcultures. Huang et al. (2003) stress the managerial implications that should be taken into account due to the differences existing between various

groups: managers should identify the different groups and how to communicate with these groups.

The third of Meyerson and Martin's paradigms is fragmentation or ambiguity. This paradigm accepts that individuals and subcultures share some viewpoints, while disagreeing on others, and that it is difficult to draw cultural and subcultural boundaries. Nevertheless, ambiguity does not mean that the organization is mired in conflict (Meyerson and Martin, 1987).

According to Meyerson and Martin (1987), paradigms serve as theoretical blinders for researchers: a chosen paradigm determines what is noticed and enacted as culture. According to Martin (2002), most researchers have adopted one of these paradigms when studying organizational culture, but it would be fruitful to use all three simultaneously. Especially the latter one, fragmentation, is rarely used in understanding organizational culture. Together these three perspectives offer a wider range of insights and avoid the research to have blind spots over the cultural questions (see also Morgan and Ogbonna, 2008). If a researcher focuses on a limited number of cultural manifestations, cultural understanding might continue to be based on one of the perspectives while a deeper and broader sample of the manifestations might allow the interplay of perspectives (Kappos and Rivard, 2008). In addition, according to Martin (1992), if we study a cultural context deeply enough, we can

find these three perspectives: there are issues that are encountered organization-wide, that are clear, and that are shared. At the same time, there are subcultural elements of culture, or some elements may be fragmented and in a state of constant flux.

Payne (2001) gives some critical notions about Meyerson and Martin's three-perspective framework. According to Payne, it does not consider if there is a possibility for a fragmented culture to become differentiated or integrated. Payne himself notes that it is clear that movements occur in all directions. Other researchers have also noticed the movements: For example, Kiley and Jensen's (2003) research showed how the organizational culture of an early childhood centre changed dramatically, in a negative way, in its shared understanding of and satisfaction with the overall organizational culture. Kappos and Rivard (2008) note that Meyerson and Martin's three perspectives may vary at different times. At times, the perspectives of the actors may be close to the level of integration while at other times, the interpretations of different groups may be inconsistent.

In my study, I followed the definition and paradigms used in Meyerson and Martin (1987). Much of the literature related to organizational culture refers to integrated cultures (Morgan and Ogbonna, 2008; Schein, 2004; Smircich, 1983). When adopting the view that culture is uniform in one organization, we lose sight of multiple subcultures. I adopted the view that culture is not monolithic and that different subcultures could co-exist in one

organization. This choice was also consistent with the nature of social constructivism, the philosophical assumption behind my research as a whole (see Berger and Luckmann 1979; Crotty, 1998). However, I did not attempt to find similarities and differences between groups or in the nature of each subculture. My target was to ascertain the meaning of culture and what kind of cultural issues are significant in new, distributed organizational structure in a day care context.

## **Methods of the study**

Two distributed organizations, Organization A and B, participated in this study. Organization A had four units and Organization B had five units. The organizations shared similar histories of how, over a decade, the organizations gradually became distributed ones. One difference was that in Organization B all the units, except for the child-minders who as family day care workers work at their own private homes, were merged to the “original” unit from the time they were established. These units did not have their own independent history, as was the case with most of the units in Organization A.

In Organization A, there was a director and 22 staff members. Organization B had one director and 26 staff members. In both organizations the director had an office in one of the units (known as the office unit) and periodically visited the other units (known as the remote

units). The organizations shared some characteristics (e.g., the number of the personnel and day care services), but there were differences. First, Organization A was located so that the distance between the units was less than 1 kilometer, but the distance between the units of Organization B was from 1 to 3 kilometers. Second, the directors had different ways of meeting the personnel. The director of Organization A held meetings and annual celebrations for the whole staff, but the director of Organization B held staff meetings and annual celebrations separately for each unit.

The data collection was carried out from 2003 to 2006. The goal was to use several methods that allowed all staff members to be informants. Individual interviews were done with only a few selected employees, but I gave everyone the opportunity to volunteer. According to Stake (1994), a case study is a choice of the object, which can be studied in many ways. The data collection methods I chose were methods used often in case studies, but I also wanted to include some ethnographic methods.

The empirical data from the staff members consist of observations, group and individual interviews, and a questionnaire. The data collection started with observation (60 hours), which was done in each unit at staff meetings and during their regular activities. I did not include the activities with the children in my observation. Instead, I focused my observation on the situations in which the staff members were among adults (e.g., coffee

breaks). The participants were aware of when they were being observed. This awareness was also an important ethical issue (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Almost all of the staff members were able to take part in the group interviews (11 groups), in addition to which there were nine individual interviews. The two directors were interviewed individually three times and once together. The interviews were partly based on the information I acquired from the observation. The form of the interviews was semi-structured (see Fontana and Prokos, 2007). The questionnaire was for the staff only and 29 (62%) people returned it. Data collection triangulation was also one way to show the credibility of the research (Patton, 2002). This article is based on the interviews with the staff members and on my observation. Cultural issues and views came up when the employees described their work, relations to other units, and the leadership in their distributed organization.

The data was analyzed using data-driven content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The use of the content analysis is today broader than its original focus on analyzing texts, counting the frequency of the words, and so on (Grbich, 2013). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) identify three approaches in content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative. This present study was conventional, because the main goal was to describe a phenomenon. Content analysis has been criticized because it often fails to uncover the hidden, latent impressions (Bos and Tarnai, 1999). To avoid this weakness, I used a long time period for

the careful data analysis process and for this article I translated a few of the direct citations from the original interviews.

## **Results**

### ***Integrated and differentiated culture in distributed day care organizations***

The data analysis highlighted that the employees in the case organizations hoped that the culture was integrated as well as differentiated. As Martin (2002) suggests, these different views can exist simultaneously. Most of the staff members wanted cultural practices (i.e., the artefacts), to be both integrated and differentiated. At the same time, there was a deep desire to maintain something unique in each unit (differentiated culture), but there was also a need for at least some norms or rules to be similar in each unit (integrated culture). Overall, as these two cultural paradigms existed in parallel, it seemed that the personnel lived in two different cultural landscapes simultaneously.

Patterns that needed the same rules and cultural coherence in every unit were the artefacts, the cultural practices, which were visible to the centers' clients, that is, to the children's parents. For example, if there was a custom to offer something for the parents for annual celebrations, the practices should have been similar across the organization.



... our clients [parents] sometimes know each other and surely do some comparing and may wonder how things are done there [in another unit] and how then here. There should be some common things in the same way. (Staff member, Organization B)

Customs such as how to use money or how vacations are held were among the topics that needed to be the same throughout the organization. The director of the distributed organization was responsible for maintaining equality. It should be noted that if there was a need for similar rules, it did not always mean that the staff members wanted to spend more time together. It was enough that some practices were in line with each other.

On the other hand, the staff members protected their subcultural practices. Work shifts were one example where the staff wanted the decision making to take place at the team and unit level and not at the organizational level.

I discussed with Noora [an employee] the work shifts and that the director had wanted to affect them. Noora said that the team had wanted to keep their customs and arrange the work shifts as they wanted. (Observation diary, Organization A)

When employees discussed the uniqueness of each unit, it was not always a concrete way of working they mentioned. The uniqueness was more the spirit and the atmosphere in each unit,

which were felt as being unique and which employees wanted to remain unique. These expressions included values how the staff in a unit wanted to do their work.

There was also a spiritual distance between the units. Some employees would explain that if they went to work in another unit, they would feel themselves to be a stranger there, at least in the beginning. One clear reason for the creation of subcultures was that those units that were found to be remote assumed that it was the staff's role or duty to create a culture of their own.

We kind of used the situation where we were able to be in peace and we worked by ourselves (...)

We were able to create our own habits. The director just accepted them and said that it looks good and gave feedback. When everything went smoothly, the director was pleased and liked that we were so self-regulated. So it began with the idea that we are a team or two teams and then we have the cleaning lady and the person in the kitchen. We have to make the best and the director will visit us every now and then. (A staff member, Organization B)

There were also assumptions that in those units where the director did not visit so often, there were more possibilities for different cultural means to be created by the staff. In other words, it was believed that the personnel in those units were able to make their own means.

One thing I have wondered is that while the director's office is in this unit, we are a bit more under surveillance. Sometimes I think if in other units [remote units] things can be done in their own way.  
(Staff member, Organization B)

Although the citations above emphasize the role of the staff, the role of the director was also significant in creating the culture. In Organization A, the director's goal was to create one community and the director nurtured the relations between the units. In Organization B, the director accepted that it was enough that the sense of community was strong in each unit. According to my interviews, members of the staff were also aware of the goal of the director whether to create one community or accept different small communities. Nevertheless, in spite of the hope for a coherent and integrated culture, the director of Organization A respected the uniqueness of each unit.

Living two cultural landscapes was also supported by the answers I received to my question about the workplace community. In the staff questionnaire I asked the respondent to continue the sentence *My workplace community includes...* The answers can be read in Table 1.

Table 1: My workplace community includes

	Organization A	Organization B
The whole organization	6	2
My own unit	0	12
My own team and immediate teams	8	1

The workplace community answers were connected to cultural issues. In Organization B, the subcultures were strong and the director had no plans to create an integrated culture and practices. This was suitable also for the staff: at least those staff members I interviewed had no desire for closer relationships with the other units. Table 1 shows how most of the staff members in Organization B saw their unit as their workplace community. The respondents' opinions in Organization A were more fragmented, but some viewed the whole organization as the workplace community. This view was supported by how, in organization A, all meetings and annual celebrations were held together, and by how the director had an agenda to create the community as a whole. Despite these results, each organization, as whole, formed its own border against other day care organizations. The employees had relationships inside their team and unit and at least weak relationships inside the whole organization and the relations with other day care organizations of the municipality were weaker.

I also asked a more detailed question concerning cultural issues when in the questionnaire I asked the respondent to continue the sentence *Values, targets and practices are the same...* Only four respondents answered that these issues were the same in the whole organization and all these answers came from Organization A. For the majority of respondents, values, targets, and practices were the same in the respondent's own team. Some employees also stated that some of the values are based on the national guidelines for early childhood education. In Finland, there is a national curriculum for early childhood education, and both the municipality level and the day care centre level curricula should be based on it.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated day care work and leadership in a distributed organization in a day care context. The basic assumption was that cultural issues are significant when organizational changes like this occur (Maanen and Barely, 1985). The findings suggest that Meyerson and Martin's (1987) integrated and differentiated cultural paradigms are present at the same time in an organization. My results suggested that culture is not always monolithic and the meaning of subcultures is evident (see Morgan and Ogbonna, 2008; Smircich, 1983). The results indicate that although belonging to a multiunit organization

meant seeking, for example, shared rules, there was still a strong need to keep something culturally unique in each unit.

The integrated paradigm was evident in the views on the manner in which some cultural artefacts, especially those that the clients could see, should be unified. Practical issues, such as the use of the budget or vacation norms, should also be the same in each unit. However, the staff members noted, for example, that the educational pedagogy should be similar in every unit.

The differentiated paradigm seemed to be more dominant as most staff members felt a sense of belonging to their immediate work community and felt that they had their own cultural habits in their own unit. One reason for the strong team and unit subcultures is that a distributed organizational structure forces the staff to work independently. In the interviews, employees emphasized several times that they had to work independently and the work was more self-regulated than it used to be. Based on the data, the new organizational structure gave the employees an opportunity to create their own subcultural manifestations. Another reason for the strong team culture may also be due to the traditional multiprofessional teamwork performed in Finnish day care units. It is typical for three members of the staff to form a close-knit team that works independently.

It was significant that between the subcultures there were no conflicts, although conflicts may occur between subcultures in particular (see van Maanen and Barley, 1985; Morgan and Ogbonna, 2008). However, it was evident that the lack of knowledge about the other units created some suspicions. But there was no competition between the subcultures to be the most powerful. Instead, each subculture showed a need to remain unique and to live in harmony with the other units. In addition, although some of the subcultures were strong, there were individual differences in the views of the staff within the same subculture (see Morgan and Ogbonna, 2008). I did not find evidence that professional groups had their own subcultures (see Schein, 2004). The subcultures I could recognize were close to van Maanen and Barley's (1985) definition of subcultures, because the distinct group within the organization the individuals felt they belonged to was related to their daily work. It was the team or one unit's staff that formed a subculture.

These findings have implications for the leadership practices and roles of day care centre directors. First, directors should understand the variety of cultural paradigms and take possible cultural differences into account. This was also evident in my data as the members in the different units believed that the director should respect the uniqueness of each unit. Subcultures should not be seen as an enemy. Second, directors should be aware of their role in influencing culture creation or change. The directors in this study had different views on

culture. One emphasized integrated views while the other highlighted differentiated views. In both organizations, the employees could sense the attitude of the director. Each of these paradigms accepts cultural change, but the extent of the change varies from organization-wide (integration) aspects to subcultural factors (differentiation) or even to individual changes (fragmentation) (Meyerson and Martin, 1987). In relation to cultural change, Kappos and Rivard (2008) note that different cultural paradigms can assume greater dominance at different times.

Third, the director should lead the discussion on cultural issues, which does not necessarily mean targeting a monolithic culture. Without discussions about culture, an organization may lose the positive impact of its subcultures and it risks a situation in which subcultures exist but lack a shared direction. (Kiley and Jensen, 2003; Lahtero and Risku, 2012; Alava et al., 2012). Schein (1993) emphasizes the role of dialogue in relation to culture as essential. Schein especially points out the need for dialogue between hierarchical subcultural boundaries, but in the organizations I studied there was a need for dialogue between vertical subcultures and to break the boundaries between them. The important issues to be discussed include (1) which cultural manifestations should be integrated and (2) when differentiation can be accepted.



The findings emphasized the existence of differentiated paradigm. Is it then necessary to create any integrated culture for the whole organization? I argue that it is. The meaning of the immediate workplace community was important, but the employees did feel that they belonged to the whole organization: they described having relationships inside their team and unit but also to the other units and to the organization as a whole. An interesting finding was how the employees saw the membership of a group, which is one of the elements of Schein's (2004) internal integration. The employees had two cultural membership borders: the employees made borders between the groups inside their organization but also the organization made a border against other day care units in the municipality. Because belonging to the distributed organization was not irrelevant for the employees there should at least be some similar, integrated cultural practices. As my respondents said, at some point there is a need for an integrated culture, but as long as the subcultures live in harmony, there may occur different subcultures. The findings support the notion of Meyerson and Martin (1987; Martin, 1992) that different cultural paradigms exist simultaneously in an organization. The paradigms are there even without creating them.

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