■ *Research Note*

Notes on an Ecology of Paradigms

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The ecology of paradigms conceptualises an alternative perspective on culture. The focus is on practice and understands culture as the paradigmatic reference of a community of practice. This looks at procedures of self-observation and self-description as well as on the routines of meaning creation and sense making. The perspective brought forward is radical by focussing primarily on communities of practice. And it is amplified by the modern proliferation of roles carried out and played by the individual calling in this sense for different paradigmatic references. This coexistence of different paradigmatic references holds for the individual as well as for the wider, even global scale. It acknowledges professions next to religions, next to youth and pop culture and next to administrative procedures. Ecology, the science of coexistence allows the synopsis of different cultures on a scale ranging from competition to symbiosis. The clash of civilisations happens at the same time as the coevolution of protestant ethics and capitalism. Based on the concept of ecology of paradigms, we can take a proactive stand and cease to submit reactively to traditions and catechisms. We may start to see possibilities and responsibilities, which come with our practices and their paradigmatic references. And finally, note that evolution correlates with symbiosis and not with competition. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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STARTING WITH CULTURE

Culture as a focal term in the humanities, in psychology, sociology, philosophy and related disciplines has become increasingly popular not only within the academic world but very much so in practical approaches for management, leadership and consulting. In an almost peculiar way, the popularity of the term culture was never backed up with practical evidence showing that the hope the term carried was justified by fruitful practical application. The whole idea suffered right from the start. There had always been a lack of clarity starting with the difference between empirical approaches and idealistic approaches. In an empirical tradition, culture has been used to describe the way in which things were performed in a specific context (Williams, 1958; Williams, 1961). On the one hand, in addition to the more behaviouristic approach, the empiric

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notion of culture refers to local narratives, sense-making and meaning creation as the practice of self-observation (Weick, 1995; Boje, 2002; Boje, 2008; Schein, 2007;). Our culture describes how we are doing things around here, we may say.

The positivistic temptation that comes with an empirical approach towards culture is to impose statistical population analysis focussing on the probability of a specific behaviour in a specific context. This is doubtlessly reading stereotypes, which almost always holds in general and almost always fails in the concrete situation. There is the tragedy of intercultural training. A certain validity in teaching stereotypes. However, in the context of real intercultural encounter, these stereotype-based approaches fail to meet the real significant other.[1] We have probably all seen these exaggerated cartoons where western businessmen dressed in a kimono were bowing to their eastern counterparts who wear a proper western business suit reaching out to shake hands. Idealistic or prescriptive approaches to culture were very much focussing on the way things should be in a specific context. Culture in that respect is used as a driver to civilise and cultivate behaviour (Elias, 1939).

A LEARNING JOURNEY INTO CULTURE

The research towards an ecology of paradigms can be described as a 25-year long learning journey. Methodologically, it is a combination of auto-ethnography and discourse practice analysis. The auto-ethnography refers to the researcher's individual experiences and the exposure to different cultures, the reflexion of these exposures and the practical usage of culture in professional contexts. The latter can be described as an interface with a discourse practice analysis. The discourse practice analysis is starting with the notion of organisational culture in the field of organisational development; the researcher can

look back on a coevolutive development path of the notion of culture and its application in professional contexts of organisational development and change management.

Point of departure of this learning journey is the primary experience of contingency. On the one side, we can argue that contingence is the flipside of complexity indicating a variety of possibilities in a more theoretical manner. On the other side, it refers to a more ontogenetic experience indicating the transition or even more so the reflexion of the friction between a primary socialisation and a secondary socialisation. This fundamentally refers to the experience that, in contrast to the initial cultural embedment of a person, there is the realisation that things could be performed, thought and made differently than in one's own culture. This primary experience of contingency is usually triggered in the form of a journey. Broadening one's horizon feeds back on one's own cultural certainties. It is like fish in the water. Not until the fish leaves the water, it has the possibility to refer to water as the embedding entity of its life.

Culture is a term that in this context, especially in the context of a journey, invites to look at different nations, peoples and religions. However, on the basis of the notion culture creates functionally in this context, namely, to address the contingency of practices, and behaviour culture can be used as a general description of the contingency of practices and behaviours. In the context of social and behavioural sciences as well as management and business studies, culture had been a fruitful term to describe differences between organisations especially in cases with identical technical focus of the business. So, culture served as a token or a joker for the experience of contingency within the very same industry. Especially in phases of mergers and acquisitions like in the 1990s and early zero years, referring to diverting organisational cultures provided a ground for the explanation of a lot of failures in the M&A field.

In the field of HR marketing we see a slightly similar yet functionally different reference to the term culture. Attracting women into the office world, the nine-to-five duties, and the dedication to a business enterprise was at times clashing with feminine role

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[1] Going back to Sullivan's concept of the significant other (Sullivan, 1953) may enlighten the debate on intercultural training. We never meet the statistical average. We meet specific people in significant relationships. So we need the concepts and competences that facilitate the specific not the statistic average.

models within society. Culture provided a platform in this debate, which allowed arguing both extremely different cases when either a masculine-dominated business world should be opened to a more emancipated society, or when a society with a so-called traditional feminine role model, mother and housekeeper, had to respond to a growing demand for workforce from the business side.

Next to the contingency aspect of culture, we have seen a discourse practical reference along the distinction of civilisation and cultivation. In this respect, culture could be used to describe in a more empirical way, the status of practices and behaviour on the one side, and on the other side, a more normative notion of how practices and behaviour should be within a certain context. Once engineered in that way, the term culture found its way into change management allowing for the description of a nontechnical transition from a current practice to a desired practice. This opens the door to debates along 'walking the talk', and the gap between desired behaviour and actual behaviour embedded in and facilitated by a set of supporting institutions, values, rules and conventions. From a systemic perspective, this notion can be embedded in its relevant context, which leads to the figure of the cultural triangle, which acknowledges the institutional, structural and procedural context of organisations, which fosters certain behaviour and practice no matter what the normative discourse is referring to.

Next to the two perspectives mentioned earlier, there has always been a statistical approach to culture especially with the reference to regional and national culture. The management training industry benefited a lot from the idea that intercultural competence was based on adaptation, on assimilation and accommodation. Referring to Piaget's idea of ontogenetic development, accommodation and assimilation served as the benchmark for skills and competences in the international and intercultural arena. Overall, the approach was beneficial to manage expectations, to reduce complexity and handle contingency. The concept, nevertheless, proved to be less fruitful in the preparation for the actual encounter. You never meet the stereo typical Chinese or German or American. Hence, concepts based on the notion of the unknown in contrast to the idea of encountering the known seem to be more helpful for actual business practices.

Discourse theory and the theory of social systems allow furthering the notion and application of culture in the business world. Niklas Luhmann refers to social systems as sense processing operations. He defines sense or meaning as the unity of the distinction between possibility and actuality. In this respect, culture becomes a memory function, which negotiates in discourses possibilities, decisions and eventually actualities. Certainly, the culture of an organisation is in the collage of stories, which generate the narrative of an organisation. Here, we are back to the initial notion of complexity, contingency and change. The exploration of the stories of this organisational collage allows describing the realm of possibilities, which allows for decision and for a change.

Following Scott's principle of observation, which says that there are always more details and always a bigger picture and always an alternative perspective stories, can be challenged in a systemic perspective that looks for the embedding context of the stories that make the organisation. Memetics has lately been the most advanced approach towards the idea to identify gen-alike cultural discriminators, which phylogenetically describes the cultural corridor wherein the cultural development of an organisation or the development of organisational culture can be realised.

This learning journey based on auto-ethnography and discourse practice analysis briefly drafts the various approaches and developments, which for the moment come together in the idea of conceptualising culture as the paradigmatic reference of a community of practice.

THE PARADIGMATIC REFERENCE OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The alternative perspective on culture, which should be put into the middle of further considerations, shall be grounded in a generic and functional approach. Culture in this sense can be conceptualised as the paradigmatic reference of a community of practice. This refers to the systemic figure of self-observation and self-description. In this community of practice is a community of and

for itself. A certain empirically observable practice can be identified as a coherent whole or context and through self-observation and self-description, it identifies and realises itself as the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The idea of the community of practice is well established and it works. The novelty, which is brought forward here, lies in two aspects. The first aspect is to link this to the term of culture, and the second and even more important aspect is to describe this in the form of a paradigmatic reference. This leads to two questions: What is a paradigm and what is the practice of referencing in the context of a community of practice observing and describing itself? What is the practice of self-observation and self-description?[2]

Turning to the paradigm as a scientific term seems to be very questionable after the critique of culture because the term paradigm has been very much disputed along the lines of Ludwik Fleck, Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault. The initial idea looking at a school of thought (Fleck, 1980) and a disciplinary set of models, methods and instruments (Kuhn, 1962) was very much challenged and critiqued prominently by Michel Foucault in his Archaeology of Knowledge (Foucault, 1969). The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, overcoming Foucault's critique, brought forward a very interesting notion of the paradigm putting an end to the dispute between deductive and inductive approaches by referring to the paradigm as the reference giving example (Agamben, 2009). In a certain way, this is a very functionalist argument, which focuses on the quality of an example being used as a reference. Linking this idea of the reference-giving example to the notion of culture makes it possible to establish a different level of analysis.

Looking at the paradigmatic reference from a generic perspective, it had been fruitful to turn towards a theory of narratives. In short, the argument here is that meaning creation and sense-making takes place in the form of storytelling (Boje, 2002). So any community of any practice tends to give meaning and sense to their own deeds by telling stories about them. Any social system tends to describe itself in the form of an action system (Luhmann, 1984), processing stories about actions and events. The generalisation and aggregation of stories may establish a broader narrative, which then serves as the paradigmatic reference of a certain practice. In reference to processes of sense-making (Schein, 2007) and meaning-creation (Lotman, 2001), it is interesting to explore Luhmann's idea of putting meaning in the centre of the structural coupling between psyche and social systems and attributing the function of processing meaning to the two operationally closed systems: the psyche and the social system (Luhmann, 1984). Luhmann conceptualises the meaning as the unity of the distinction of actuality and possibility. This is to say that a social system is integrated by its capability to distinguish and memorise what actually happens and what could be possible [ibid.]. We see that in this notion mapped towards the term of culture, an interesting relationship emerges. It is not so much opening up a two by two grid of actuality and possibility on the one side, and a prescriptive 'should be' and 'should not be' on the other side. The more interesting approach is to transfer the notion of meaning and put it at the centre of the term culture. In this, culture is focussed on the practice and the results of sense-making and meaning creation within specific social systems, which are constituted by this very sense-making and meaning creation.

The idea at the community of practice can, as it originally started, be used to refer to a specific profession. However, we can think of both terms, community and practice, much broader than reducing them to a specific profession. We could, as carried out in market research, identify segments within a society, which share a specific homogeneous practice called lifestyle. We could refer to entire cooperations as being a community of practice, which is also reflected in the term corporate culture. We could even go as far as identifying a nation as heterogeneous yet integrated community of a specific shared practice. We could go as far as identifying a religion as a community of a specific spiritual practice. We can broaden the concept of the community of practice without losing the idea of the

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[2] The conditions for the possibilities of self-observation and self-description (Hahn, 1987; Hahn, 2000) are determined by cultural paradigms as well, which creates a self-reinforcing cycle. The need for a more instrumental understanding of the dynamics of language and communication calls for a systems approach and applied cybernetics.

paradigmatic reference constituting what we may want to describe with the term culture. The practice of referencing, storytelling and the establishing of narratives remains the same wherever along the scale we are looking at. It is interesting and important to know that none or almost none of the communities of practice include the entire practices doings and deeds of a person. In fact, this means that a person usually belongs to a multitude of communities of practice. We can relate that to George Mead's concept of the role as a centre category of sociology (Mead, 1934). This means that a person in different aspects of their life belongs to different communities of practice wherein the person relates to and fulfils a specific role. It is easy to realise that within that concept of roles and overlapping communities of practice, we do not necessarily look at a coherent set of roles and references. On the contrary, modern society is very much characterised by the inconsistencies of the different communities of practice colliding and causing friction within the person (Ehrenberg, 2004; Sennett, 1998).

Culture as a paradigmatic reference of a community of practice is a hermeneutic adventure. It challenges our understanding of paradigms in a specific social context. Along the lines of systemic inquiry processes (Klein, 2005), we can identify the different stories and their foci of attention, which generate the established and shared big picture serving as a reference to a specific community of practice. Next to the living stories, we can explore the written and documented evidence describing and prescribing practices of a specific community. We can use document analysis and qualitative interviews, contrast the one with the other and establish in a triangulation of observation what serves as the paradigmatic reference, what serves as the reference giving example.

THE ECOLOGY OF PARADIGMS

If we pursue the idea of culture being the paradigmatic reference of a community of practice, we are entering a broad field, which we may want to refer to as the ecology of paradigms. On the basis of the idea of the overlapping communities of practice with different paradigmatic references, we have to acknowledge that we are looking even from the individual perspective at a multitude of coexisting paradigms referencing at least the larger proportion of human activities. We may want to describe this multitude of paradigms as an ecology. Ecology shall be referred to as the science of coexistence. If we look at the idea of ecology being the science of coexistence, we are looking at a rich spectrum that reaches from the one extreme of competition and the survival of the fittest on the one end to symbiosis on the other end. And looking into nature, we will find examples for the extreme as well as for any possible position within the spectrum between the two extremes. The idea of transferring the notion of an ecology into the realms of paradigms may be new. Nevertheless, looking at the coexistence of paradigms, religions and ideologies is not new and has seen prominent examples like Max Weber's works on the Protestant Ethics going well together with capitalism (Weber, 1988), or Huntington's Clash of Civilisations where especially monotheistic religions have a problem on getting along with each other (Huntington, 1996).

Once we engage in the idea of an ecology of paradigms, we are looking at a vast task of exploring and mapping the different paradigms, and the dynamics they create in their interplay. We may say that it is the easy part of this task to start from the fields where paradigms clash, and their troublesome coexistence sprouts violence and draws attention. This is where we look at paradoxes in the texture of the social fabric. We will be able to identify structural complications like, for example, in the problematic build of monotheistic religions in contrast to polytheism. Monotheism puts religion in focus and into a structural conflict with all other religions. In contrast, polytheism is not only able to incorporate a variety of own gods and goddesses but provides an easy access to incorporate further characters and different ideas.

We may want to distinguish in the ecology of paradigms a macro-level according to the reach of a paradigm or religion from the micro-level of local paradigms as of organisational culture or a specific urban or suburban character. And last but not least, we may use the idea of the

ecology of paradigms to investigate the multiple, overlapping layers of individual roles of a person. Starting at the fringes where the coexistence of different paradigms draws the short straw compared to the more stable regions. Life cycle approaches will allow describing the dynamics of paradigms over time and finally qualifying the implications and consequences of different paradigms in use shall allow for new approaches from a paradigm implication analysis towards ideas of change and strategies to the notion of the paradigmatic reference of a community of practice. And finally, this application of paradigm impact analysis will lead to the notion of social design (Mau, 2004; Klein, 2009). It allows for thriving on cultural contingency. In all of that we should take into account that what we see in Asia concerning the results of cultural evolution, which may hold for the development of paradigms as well.[3] Paradigms are kludge (Marcus, 2005), which is to say that paradigms are functional and often just good enough implying that they are rarely the best possible paradigm in use. Nature does not strive for the optimum. Good is good enough. Pareto efficiency rules nature. And overcoming a popular myth evolution does not connote with competition. Evolution connotes with symbiosis (Allen, 1992).

The ecology of paradigms comes with an inherent promise. This is the promise that nature can be cultivated in a beneficial way. And we can think immediately about many possible interventions to improve the coexistence of paradigms, reduce frictions and foster desirable and fruitful alliances. Of course, all this comes at a price. We need to learn to embrace contingency. We need to let go cherished certainties. We need to become comfortable with the idea that there is always another way to accomplish what we want to do, and there is always another possibility to observe and describe this very practice. We need to relax. And this may not sound too frightening after all.

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[3] A valuable source to explore and illustrate the context of various co-existing approaches to cultural evolution in South-East Asia can be found in the rich chronic by Francis Pike: Empires at war (Pike, 2010).

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