# 11

# Rapid appraisal of organisational cultures: a challenge for field work

**Uwe Kievelitz and Rolf-Dieter Reineke**

## Deficits in organisational culture research

The study of organisations as an object of knowledge from a cultural point of view is not new, but it has long been neglected. The reason for the sudden awakening of interest in this approach lies partly in studies of the success of Japanese and especially American enterprises (see Pascale and Athos, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982), and partly in reflections about the consequences of the 'changing values' observed in the Western world (Staffelback, 1988; Rosenstiel et al, 1987; Klages, 1984). Although the importance of the concept to the development of theories and the success of the enterprises is frequently acknowledged, the organisational culture approach is often the subject of critical discussion. This criticism may be summarised as follows (Sandner, 1987; Seidel, 1987; Hofstede, 1986):

- Many of the concepts developed are lacking in methodological meticulousness. In particular, they often lack of explanation of their particular situation so that the concepts put forward seem to become patent recipes. It is also striking that the anthropological fundamentals of the organisational culture approach rarely form an explicit subject of the study.

- The extent of empirical research in this field is very small in relation to the wealth of theory. One reason for this is no doubt that it is very difficult to research such a complex subject. However, it would also seem that in the past not enough attention has been devoted to the question of how and with what methods an organisational culture is to be explored and what

possibilities and limitations exist in this field.

## Culture and organisational culture

Before we can tackle the question of exploring organisational cultures, we need to clarify what is by *culture* means, otherwise it remains unclear what phenomena are to be studied (Drumm, 1988; Helmers, 1990).

Starting with management research on a comparative cultural basis, which at least in the USA has a long tradition and investigates the influence of overall societal culture on companies in particular, research assumes that a specific culture in each individual organisation exists. Thus in a macro-culture whose boundaries are determined by a society, a nation or a people, totally different organisational cultures often exist side by side (Bleicher, 1984). These microcultures, however, are frequently considerably influenced by the macro-culture. Viewing an organisation as a kind of mini-society, means that organisational culture is conveniently based on society's concept of culture.

Recent approaches combine different cultural perspectives in an integrated system. This approach attaches considerable importance to the cultural anthropology basis of organisational culture research, and at the same time looks at the practical value of such concepts. We inevitably come to the conclusion that, while it is in principle possible to influence an organisational culture, such influence is only controllable to a limited extent and always represents a lengthy process. Against this background the problems involved in surveys are discussed below.

## Field research and 'rapid organisational appraisal'

As all approaches to empirical surveys of organisational cultures are limited (see Reineke, 1989), it is often necessary to use as many measuring methods as possible in parallel to cater for the complexity of the existing phenomenon (Dierkes, 1988). Such a procedure is very problematical as it lacks a theoretical basis. The question also arises as to whether the effort and expense involved is justified in every case. Both for comparative empirical studies on a large scale and for practical problems where the organisational culture factor may be only one of a number of aspects, there is a need to search for types of study that produce theoretically satisfactory output with a reasonable input. We examine the possibility of using the approaches and tools developed in cultural anthropology to understand organisational cultures.

Field research as a basic method has proved to be a major component of cultural anthropology research, even if its importance varies from case to case. During field research a number of different methods are used, each yielding different results, but together leading to a more exact understanding of the actual situation: the problem under investigation - in this case the understanding of an organisational culture - is described in increasingly concrete terms in a step-by-step procedure. Here progress is achieved by systematic observation in connection with questions that can be answered with the aid of dialogues and interviews or by studying suitable sources (e.g. organisation charts, annual reports). Conversely, the study of sources may itself raise questions that can be clarified through observations by the researcher and/or dialogue with the members of the culture, i.e. the employees of an organisation.

An important element here would appear to be the active experiencing of everyday working life, which in turn forms the basis for an intensive dialogue with the members of the culture. On the basis of this 'interpretative paradigm' (Osterloh, 1988) and with the aid of the de-objectivised role of the researcher, who thus increasingly becomes a partner in dialogue with the members of the organisation, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of the organisational culture.

Owing to the complex set of facts that are to be surveyed in a field research study, the time frame for such a study is usually 6-12 months. This kind of procedure is useful in principle for organisational cultures as well, as in institutions such as companies or public authorities different activities are characteristic of everyday working life at different times of the year (e.g. annual financial statements, preparation of (annual) plans). The 'classical' method of field research thus has the disadvantage that the survey takes a relatively long time.

The ratio of research input to results may be too unfavourable and may not justify such a long-term approach. The same is true of questions where nothing is yet known about an organisational culture and where the first need is to develop a rough research grid, a first concrete cultural model. In such cases a method based on classical field research, that of 'Rapid Organisational Appraisal' (ROA), suggests itself. The characteristics of approach are summarised in Table 1. The approach proposed here is based on the 'Rapid (Rural) Appraisal' (RRA) method.

2

## Table 1. Characteristics of a 'rapid organisational appraisal'

Use of a team of researchers (usually 4-8 persons)

Interdisciplinary orientation (business economists, psychologists, sociologists, ethnologists)

Duration of survey: 2-4 weeks

Study usually limited number of "face-to-face groups"

Predominantly heuristic approach to understanding the organisational culture in question

Approach determined by intensive dialogue with the members of the organisation

Qualitative data collection predominates

Use of observation, dialogue and source interpretation (triangulation) in the context of the field research method

Daily systematised evaluation and coordination discussions by researcher team

The RRA method was originally developed for problems of project work in developing countries, where the important thing was to obtain, under severe time constraints and with a limited input of resources. RRA has usually been carried out by a research group of interdisciplinary composition, not by a single person. This permits, and requires, an intensive systematic dialogue between the members of the research group, which is intended to lead to more valid findings.

The most important aspect here is a multidisciplinary team approach which for reasons of group dynamics can best be achieved with 4 - 8 people. Two to four weeks have proven to be a practical research period, each day including survey evaluation/discussion. In the survey phase, the focus is on qualitative data collection using the triangulation approach, with teams of two people.

In the daily evaluations, first the group reports on, records (e.g. using visualisation methods, sociograms etc) and discusses the information obtained, which leads to further questions or hypotheses. Then the main tasks for the next day and any changes to the methodology are identified. In this way a research-guiding question is defined in specific terms and increasingly narrowed down to the central objects of knowledge, so that even after a short time extensive qualitative findings are available about the organisational culture studied.

- **Problems with the field research concept**

Both in classical field research and in a 'Rapid Organisational Appraisal' a number of fundamental problems arise when they are applied to organisations but there are ways to overcome them (Perey, 1989).

### Research ethics

The problem of ethical justifiability of research arises with any study. In the case we are exploring, it occurs principally at two levels: regarding the interests of the organisation under investigation and the protection of the individual rights of members of the organisation (Perey, 1989).

### Size of organisation

The size of the organisation or the research interest in question may require the research field to be narrowed down. This can be done in spatial terms or on the basis of hierarchical levels.

### Interpretation grid

The subjectivity of the researcher is important when using field research methods, since the emphasis is on qualitative survey with the aim of understanding an organisational culture. This is necessarily a highly individualised method. This disadvantage can however be minimised by:

3

- triangulation i.e. using several different data collection steps;
- an interdisciplinary research team; and,
- third-party checking of the findings, in which all prior assumptions, theoretical frameworks and working steps must be made explicit.

## Role definition

Role definition by the researcher at the beginning of field research is crucial to find a uniform and generally accepted role vis-a-vis all members of the organisation with whom he/she comes into contact. It is sensible to choose a role that also leads to active participation in day-to-day business and increased contact with the organisation's members. In this way the researcher(s) will be more successful in becoming familiar with the work context and understanding unfamiliar behaviourial norms, values and social relationships. It should be noted here that the role chosen in each case has a crucial influence on the communication dynamics with the members of the culture (Berger and Luckmann, 1982).

## Culture shock

After entering the organisation in question, it is possible to encounter the phenomenon of culture shock. Culture shock means emotional pressure and feelings of insecurity which may even lead to temporary incapacity to function properly, that an individual experiences during the initial period of direct interaction with an unknown culture (Lundstedt, 1963). Basically, Perey's view (1989) may be accepted that culture shock does not present a major problem in the analysis of organisational cultures. This is particularly because the researcher, sees a strange organisation only to a limited extent as an unknown social system; what is more, s/he is only exposing her/himself to it for a limited period and with a limited degree of personal involvement.

## Language

The problem of language is akin to the problems that arise on entering a different culture. It is generally necessary to familiarise oneself with the technical language of the individual organisation and the jargon spoken by its employees. At the same time this is an integral part of the research, since the specific organisation language permits conclusions to be drawn about values, norms and other cultural attributes. In most cases, therefore, linguistic information will form part of the data collected.

## Informants

'Key individuals' can provide information about the organisational culture in question. Since each employee can only represent a section of the overall culture there are likely to be risks of the reconstructed overall picture being distorted if only a few are consulted. This is even more true where the selected main or key informants represent organisation-specific marginal positions. Therefore it is necessary, to compare their statements with other observations or views. This applies even after specific interest groups have been identified.

## Interpretation frame

The methodological problems in the interpretation of the data collected are well known (Osterloh, 1988; Drumm, 1988). Four main problem areas can be identified:

- drawing conclusions from indicators about underlying value systems;
- value systems obtained by questioning compared with 'real' ones;
- individual case studies without the possibility of indicator-guided cultural comparison; and,
- homogenisation of cultural picture.

To a certain degree, the first three methodological problems can be overcome by using a methodology based on the 'interpretative paradigm', i.e. on understanding. What is sought here is not a direct conclusion drawn from an indicator about a value system, but an overall evaluation of all data from observations, interviews and source interpretation, combined with validating dialogues with the members of the culture. From this holistic, and interactive analysis it is possible to differentiate:

- internal and external views of a culture; and,

- cultural norms/values and the way people actually act.

It is quite possible to link a qualitative interpretative approach of this kind with quantitative methods, especially with structured interviews or questionnaires (see Table 2).

The problem of homogenisation relates to neglecting, in the process of analysis, interpretation and portrayal, any deviant observations that are at variance with a recognised basic structure. Especially in an organisational culture, individual employees, groups or facts will be found that, for example, do not tally with a demonstrated general value orientation in the organisation. It is of great importance to avoid the compulsion to produce a homogeneous picture and neglect such cases. On the contrary, they should be analysed and documented. This increases the accuracy of the findings.

### Time frame

It is necessary to aim for an optimal research input. Generally speaking, a long-term presence in an organisation is useful to permit a realistic interpretation of the organisational culture. However, if a research group is allocated to a study and if the field research is primarily to serve heuristic purposes, it is possible to fall back on the ROA as described above. Care should be taken to include research at particularly important and relevant phases in the annual cycle of an organisation.

### • Concluding remarks

The study has shown the broad applicability of field research methods for surveying organisational cultures. An alternative to 'classical' field studies which, as a rule take 6-12 months, is 'Rapid Organisational Analysis' (ROA). This method, which permits the surveying of an organisation in a relatively short period (2-4 weeks) can not be used for cases of organisational culture research. Where research interest is focused on the exact registration of the organisational culture, intensive field work extending over several months is indispensable. This often follows automatically from the changes in everyday working life during the various phases of an annual cycle. Even for such complex projects, however, ROA may represent an important first step. ROA makes it possible to draw up research-guiding questions in the sense of a heuristic approach.

### Table 2. Methodological phases for surveying an organisational culture

| Phase | Activities |
|---|---|
| 1. Triangulation | Field research or ROA with observation-dialogue-interpretation of sources |
| 2. "Understanding" | Holistic interpretation of data, including links between indicators and value attitudes |
| 3. Developing type/model | Developing a model or a typology of the entire organisational culture |
| 4. Validation | Testing the model or typology by means of dialogue with the members of the organisation |
| 5. Quantification | Applying quantitative methods, eg. with the aid of narrative interviews |

Solving the methodological problem of recording of organisational cultures is probably of crucial importance for the further development and the acceptance of the suggested approach. This makes it all the more surprising to note the continuing relative lack of discussion on this subject. Against this background an intensive interdisciplinary debate on this problem is desirable.

- **Uwe Kievelitz** and **Rolf-Dieter Reineke**, Planning Officers, Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Technische Zusammernarbeit (GTZ), GmbH, Postfach 5180, D-6236 Eschborn, Germany.

### REFERENCES

Berger, P and Luckmann, T. 1982. Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie. Frankfurt/Main.

Bleicher, K. 1984. Auf dem Wege zu einer Kulturpolitik der Unternehmung. Zfo (8/84), 494-500.

Dierkes, M. 1988. Unternehmenskultur and Unternehmensfuhrung - Konzeptionelle Ansatze and gesicherte Erkenntnisse. ZfB, 58 (5-6/88), 554-575.

Drumm, H.J. 1988. Probleme der Erfassung und Messung von Unternehmungskultur, in: Dulfer, E. (ed). Organisationskultur, Phanomen - Philosophie - Technologie. Stuttgart.

Dulfer, E. (ed) 1988. Organisationskultur, Phanomen - Philosophie - Technologie. Stuttgart.

Helmers, S. 1990. Theoretische und methodische Beitrage der Ethnologie zur Unternehmenskulturforschung. Veroffentlichungsreihe der Abteilung Organisation und Technikgenese des Forschungsschwerpunkts Technik - Arbeit - Umwelt des Wissenschaftszentrums Berlin fur Sozialforschung, Paper No. FS II, 90-106. Berlin.

Hofstede, G. 1986. Editorial: The Usefulness of the `Organisational Culture' Concept. Journal of Management Studies, 23, 253-257.

Klages, H. 1984. Wertorientierungen im Wandel. Frankfurt, New York.

Lundstedt, S. 1963. An Introduction to some Evolving Problems in Cross-Cultural Research. Journal of Social Issues, 19 (3/63), 1-9.

Osterloh, M. 1988. Methodische Probleme einer empirischen Erforschung von Organisationskulturen, in: Dulfer, E. Organisationskultur, Phanomen - Philosophie - Technologie. Stuttgart.

Pascale, R.T. and Athos, A.G. 1982. The Art of Japanese Management. Applications for American Executives. New York.

Perey, M.H. 1989. Entwicklungshilfe und Anthropologie - Neue Perspektiven. Working Paper No. 116, Forschungsschwerpunkt Entwicklungssoziologie, Bielefeld.

Peters, T.J. and Waterman, R.H. 1982. In Search of Excellence - Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies. New York.

Reineke, R.D. 1989. Akkulturation von Auslandsakquisitionen. Eine Untersuchung zur unternehmenskulturellen Anpassung. Wiesbaden.

Rosenstiel, L. von, Einsiedler, H.E., and Streich, R.K. 1987. Wertewandel als Herausforderung fur die Unternehmenspolitik. Stuttgart.

Sandner, K. 1987. Das Unbehagen an der Organisationskultur. DBW, 47 (2/87), 242-244.

Seidel, E. 1987. Unternehmenskultur. Warnung vor der Selbstzerstorung eines Konzepts. Zfo, (5/87), 295-300

Staffelback, B. 1988. Werte im Management. Theorie und Praxis. Zfo, (1/88), 25-30.

6