



Cultural Synergy and Organizational Change: From Crisis to Innovation

Pernille S. Strøbæk¹ & Joachim Vogt²

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

² Work and Engineering Psychology Group, Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany

ABSTRACT

This paper explores informal codes and rhythms of social behavior at work and their relation to organizational change and wellbeing. After a merger within a public service organization we organized 8 focus groups of 2-3 clerical or academic employees within a head office and a division office ($N = 21$). Word counts of 'I' and 'we' revealed that people sharing pre-merger organizational background (homogeneous groups) used 'we' more often than heterogeneous groups. Head office employees were concerned with workload and social code, whereas division office employees mainly discussed meetings, commitment, and office space. Organizational background rather than office cultures guided these differences. We found that in a merged organization cultural synergies are possible to create if practical and social values for employees are offered. Thus, interesting new ways to transform problems and frustrations into solutions and innovations were revealed and deserve further research.

Keywords: corporate culture, occupational health, organizational restructuring, social rhythms

1 Introduction

Our focus is the 'soft factors' of organizations as we investigate informal codes and rhythms of social workplace behavior in the wake of organizational change. We introduce a notion on *cultural synergy* as a main research target that denotes the positive and beneficial sides of social group life within organizations. Cultural synergy as a term reflects the fact that when employees work together in harmony with each other and their work tasks, positive synergy processes are produced and utilized for the sake of individuals and organizations. Cultural synergy is a highly relevant concept to address when dealing with organizational and employee wellbeing because it highlights important potentials in designing work with optimal workload and working conditions.

The importance of linking organizational culture and the social makeup of wellbeing at work has already been addressed by others. Lämsäalmi, Peiró, and Kivimäki (2000), for example, found that employee understandings of occupational stress and coping possibilities vary according to collective definitions found within the organization. In addition, other studies carried out by Harkness, Long, Bermbach, Patterson, Jordan, and Kahn (2005) and Kinman and Jones (2005) confirmed the social side of occupational stress in investigating representations of stress description and understanding at work. Boyd (2002) reported a study on customer violence to employee health and wellbeing. This study underlined the importance of exploring what an organization is actually occupied with and the risks this might expose workers to.

Strøbæk (2011) reported a study on emotion management as a highly socialized activity which was made difficult in the face of an organizational merger. These studies have, among many others, provided important knowledge about the social fabric of employee health and wellbeing at work. What remains, however, is to facilitate a focus on how the social and cultural rhythms of organizations can benefit employee health and wellbeing. Some studies on organizational crisis intervention programmes such as critical incident stress management (CISM) revealed such cultural synergies. Vogt, Leonhardt, Köper, and Pennig (2004) reported that air traffic controllers who had never taken advantage of a CISM programme nevertheless attributed 3% of their recovery after critical incidents to CISM. The reason was that the introduction of the CISM programme had generally improved the corporate culture of the organization: critical incidents were no longer seen as the result of 'human failure', but rather as an inherent part of the job for which the organization must make provisions, about which the team must talk, from which all involved must learn, and to which any person may respond to with critical stress reactions. The entire staff – even those who had never experienced a critical incident nor used CISM after such an incident – reported benefits from this improvement of the corporate culture such as the back-up and safety/support network that it produced. These findings were confirmed in a related and larger study on organizational culture and CISM (Vogt, Pennig & Leonhardt, 2007).

1.1 Cultural synergy and organizational change

These studies provide evidence that cultural synergies improve organizational and employee wellbeing. The empirical findings also confirm the importance of facilitating cultural synergies during organizational change.

However, it must also be noted that organizational change is usually uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and resisted (Kotter & Cohen, 2002) so that synergies are lost. The impact of organizational change on cultural synergy within organizations has not yet been sufficiently studied. In merged organizations different cultures mix and match; the power relations and interaction logics of employees must, therefore, be negotiated. Within that process social rhythms may desynchronize with a loss of the beneficial aspects of social group life and thus negative consequences for employee wellbeing.

Combining the focus on cultural synergy and organizational change is an interesting and relevant new development which we set out to pursue in the present paper. Our approach is explorative in nature since our aim here is to inspire and explain the process and relevance of cultural synergies of organizational change. Our starting point is two general assumptions: 1) aspects of cultural synergy are to be addressed at group level because 2) cultural synergy is a collective mindset and process of common definition and understanding. Following these assumptions we put forth the general hypothesis that cultural synergy is challenged in the face of organizational change. Indeed, we suggest that organizational merger processes are cultural crisis events threatening potential harm to organizational and employee wellbeing.

Before we turn to the empirical investigation a few more theoretical remarks on organizational culture and change must be considered in order to unfold our logic of combining cultural synergy and organizational change.

1.2 The Concept of Culture

A definition of culture in general is not trivial and terms like 'organizational culture' (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000), 'corporate culture' (Gabler, 2013), and 'safety culture' (Pantankar, Brown, Sabin & Bigda-Peyton, 2010) are even more difficult. Definitions range from 'the human made part of the environment' (Triandis, 1989) to 'a collective programming or software of the mind' (Hofstede, 1980). Thomas (2003, p. 22) suggests the following definition as helpful for improving the cooperation among people of different nationalities: "*Culture is always present as an orientation system that is typical for a nation, society, organization or group*" (our translation). Culture may be defined as the sum of all conventional actions, mindsets, mentalities and beliefs shared by a group of people or a nation. Cultures may be expressed among others through language, gestures, facial expressions, clothing, status symbols, and rituals. Common values and norms are the essence of culture and influence attitudes and behaviour (Trompenaars, 1993). Culture reduces complexity; thanks to culture, we are not constantly forced to consider how to interpret situations and how to behave in them.

1.2.1 Organizational Culture

Organizations today are characterized by high complexity and interactivity of processes and actors. In accordance with the idea of a social construct, organizational culture (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000) is based on the way operational processes are perceived within and outside the organization. The overall organizational culture, therefore, manifests in daily work routines, management decisions, how members of an organization communicate, how criticism, problems, and errors are dealt with, and how much is invested in selecting new team members and required competences.

A more precise definition has been offered by Schein (1990, p. 111) who defines organizational culture as "*a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, is to be taught to new members entering the organization as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems*". Drawing upon Schein's framework, we also agree to the suggestion made by Hollnagel, Woods, and Levenson (2006) that culture is what an organization does, not something it has. It is an active element of the organization and its practices. A culture of mutual trust, learning, innovation, and health (Kastner, 2006) must be actively maintained through the interaction of operators and managers; it draws its strength from how managerial and operational staff 'live' and continuously improves a corporate culture.

1.3 Organizational Change

Organizational restructuring (Köper & Richter, 2012) takes place at all organizational and at larger societal levels. Organizational change and restructuring are inevitable events in the context of today's complex and highly competitive global market. As a result, the view that organizational change events are extraordinary and follow a certain intersectional logic of, for example, Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze model (Lewin, 1958) must be challenged. For example, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) suggested that organizational change is to be seen as a normal process of human interaction and a normal condition of organizational life. According to this line of argument organizations today are 'moving objects' and ever-changing in the modern, fast moving, and competitive global market.

The way an organization handles situations of change will depend on its culture and the attention that management gives to issues of organisational culture. As suggested by Tsoukas and Chia (2002), organizational change may reflect a core aspect of the culture and attitude of an organization. However, there are very different types of organizational change, affecting different people in different organizations. Small scale change events may not even be noticed by the majority of the organization (such as changing newsletter strategy) whereas other changes may force members to reflect upon their organization, practice, culture, and maybe change their whole life (for example, by requiring a move to another country).

Since this article deals with cultural synergies in the wake of organizational mergers, our focus is the large scale change, a change which forces members of the organization to reflect upon their work practices and social rhythms in order to make alignments with the new work and organizational settlements.

2 Method

2.1 Introduction

The study that is used for our present purpose was conducted in 2008 as part of a research project at the University of Copenhagen on worksite stress emotion and exhaustion among public-sector caseworkers. The study was conducted approximately one year prior to the largest merger event ever seen in Denmark. The political motivation for this merger was to modernize the public sector in Denmark and to make it more efficient when handling central welfare obligations. In practice the merger made the public units in Denmark larger and with a larger geographical area to attend to with regard to citizen population. The number of units was, therefore, greatly reduced. 271 municipals became 98 municipals, 13 Counties and 3 municipal Counties were merged into 5 Regions, and 14 State Counties and 1 governmental council board were merged into 5 State Administrations (Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, 2005).

About 455.000 public workers were relocated (Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, 2006). This is a massive number of people within the Danish context, corresponding to approximately 8% of the total population.

2.2 Design and procedure

Following the interaction logic of cultural synergy that suggests "...that the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another" (Goffman, 1967, p. 2) we chose to conduct a focus group study (Krueger & Casey, 2008; Morgan, 1997). In the focus group sessions we brought 2-3 people together in defining and negotiating issues of community feeling within the newly merged organization. The focus groups had the character of discussion rather than interview sessions. In order to initiate group discussions, reflections, and definitions, the focus groups were structured around group tasks (Bloor, Frankland, Thoms & Robson, 2001; Halkier, 2008) facilitated by the first author as moderator. Rather than controlling or directing discussion, the moderator's role was to guide the exploration of shared understandings as they unfolded naturally (Bloor et al, 2001).

The procedure was as follows:

- 1) The purpose of the focus group and the role of the moderator were explained alongside the importance of having an open dialogue of confidentiality.
- 2) One question was written on a whiteboard. The question was: What is important for your feelings of community within your office?

3) Participants were asked to brainstorm individually in response to this question for approximately 5 minutes and to write down keywords on yellow post-it notes.

4) The A0 format task poster, shown below in figure 1, was presented, taking one sub-task at the time: First, participants were asked to put their post-it notes on the top section of the poster and then to present them to each other. Second, the group task on the bottom section of the task poster was introduced. Participants were asked to discuss their answers to the question and, through joint discussion, to identify what aspects of their workplace were (1) most important to community feeling (top of task pyramid), (2) what aspects were of medium importance (middle pyramid), and (3) what aspects were important but not to the same extent as the ones mentioned so far (lower pyramid).

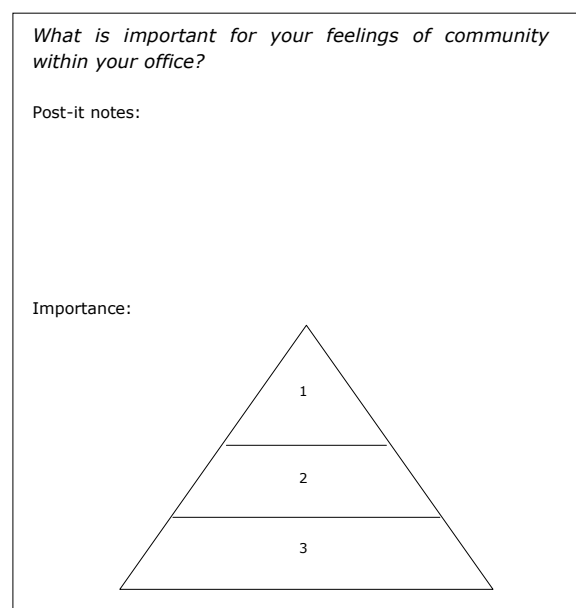


Figure 1: Replication of focus group task poster used in focus group sessions.

The use of post-it notes enabled the task posters to be reused in group sessions but also, and more importantly, gave participants the opportunity to keep personal answers private by not exposing them on the task poster. It also enabled participants to change their minds during discussions as they easily could move and remove the post-its on the task poster.

Before the focus group sessions were carried out, each participant received verbal and written information on the project and related ethical issues, including information regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Each participant gave written consent to be part of the study. All focus group sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Further, all post-it notes were kept and photographs were taken of the completed task poster.

2.3 Participants

One State Administration that had merged from three former State Counties participated in the study. Geographically, this State Administration covers a large area of Denmark with significant demographic and local differences. Relocated study participants commuted up to 200km between home and work. Two offices, both dealing with public family law, participated in the study. One office was located within the main organization of the State Administration and functioned as head office within the family law unit. The other office was a division office and located more than 100 kilometers away from the head office.

A total number of 21 caseworkers (female $N=20$, male $N=1$), who were quite evenly divided between the head office ($N=10$) and the division office ($N=11$), participated in this study. Fifty seven percent of the participants were clerical staff and 43% were academic staff. Ages varied between 27 and 64 ($M=46$ years). The years of employment as public caseworker varied between 1 week and 35 years ($M=20$ years). Ten percent of the sample were employed after the merger and are referred to as 'newly employed'. Of the participants who experienced the merger (90%), about half (53%) were not relocated after the merger and are referred to as 'stayers'. The other half (47%) were relocated from their pre-merger offices and are referred to as 'newcomers'.

2.4 Material

The focus groups were segmented according to the stratifications or categories of 'office belonging' (head office/division office), 'job position' (academic/clerical caseworker) and 'organizational background' ('stayer'/'newcomer'/'newly employed'). Groups in which participants shared common organizational background were labeled homogeneous groups, whereas groups with a mix

of stayers, newcomers and freshmen were labeled heterogeneous.

Our focus groups were small-scale. The reason was a desire to actively engage everyone in the group discussions. The smaller the group, the less likely it is to see inactive group members (Morgan, 1997). Our wish was to construct focus groups of 3-4 participants in each.

However, due to our segmenting criteria and because a couple of our participants had to make last-minute cancellations due to sickness we ended up with a total of 8 focus groups with 2-3 participants. Table 1 provides an overview of our focus groups.

2.5 Analysis

2.5.1 The collective mindset of cultural synergy

To get a detailed 'descriptive theory' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005) of the collective mindset guiding processes of cultural synergy, an inductive analysis of the data was conducted following the grounded theory approach (Charmez, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Transcripts were first read using an 'open coding' procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): data were categorized into thematic codes without using categories imposed from outside.

Next, the thematic codes were organized in stable and dominating 'collective themes' as they appeared in the explanations, stories, and references within discussions. Collective themes were defined as postulates, stories, and attitudes approved and/or promoted by participants as they engaged in discussion. Identified collective themes were crosschecked with pictures and post-it notes so that a parallel between data from the discussions was drawn.

Table 1: Focus group overview.

Homogeneous	Office	Function	N	'Stayers'	'Newcomers'	'Newly employed'	Duration of discussion (minutes:seconds)
Focus group 2	Head	Clerical	3	3			34:11
Focus group 6	Division	Academic	3		3		41:33
Focus group 7	Division	Clerical	3	3			40:49
Focus group 8 ¹	Division	Academic/clerical	2	2			30:14
Heterogeneous							
Focus group 1	Head	Academic	2	1		1	47:06
Focus group 3 ²	Head	Clerical	2		2		36:19
Focus group 4	Head	Clerical	3		2	1	44:41
Focus group 5	Division	Academic	3	1	2		47:04
TOTAL			21	10	9	2	5:34:61

¹ Participants in group 8 are heterogeneous in job position. However, the particular clerical worker within this group had job tasks very similar to the academic caseworkers. Thus, the clerical caseworker had a better match with the academic job position group than with the clerical job position group.

² Participants in group 3 were both newcomers. However, they did not share an organizational background, and were therefore categorized as heterogeneous.

This crosscheck validated the identified themes across participants' choices and decisions. It often required further analysis of the transcripts and on-going iterative processes. This iteration between data and themes ended as soon as the dominant collective mind-sets within the group discussions were obtained, a situation Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as 'theoretical saturation'. Four fundamental 'collective mind-set recipes', which reflect Schein's (1990) notion of basic assumptions discovered or developed by a given group, were identified and distinguished: (1) Manifest codes and rules guiding explicit expectations, behaviours, and understandings of the professional tasks. (2) Social myths and missions guiding engagement, commitment, and involvement in the daily life. (3) Cognitive and emotional probabilities guiding how one is supposed to think and feel. (4) Boundaries and location explicating unit divisions and group structures.

Based on these four collective mind-set categories, patterns of main topics were identified that formed and transformed cultural synergy processes within the organization.

2.5.2 The impact of organizational change

In order to investigate our a priori assumptions on cultural synergy and organizational change, count method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2005) were combined. In an attempt to expose the presence of underlying structures of cultural synergies within group discussions, we counted pronouns of 'I' and 'we' used in groups of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. The two pronouns may be understood as indexes of an individualized group climate as opposed to a more collective one (Fairclough, 2005). We assumed the latter to be associated with cultural synergy. Thus, we expected more 'we' pronouns to be used in homogeneous groups (2,6,7,8) than in heterogeneous groups (1,3,4,5). Our assumption was that a 'we-effect' in homogeneous groups would suggest established cultural synergies among participants. Merging requires new common cultural synergic invention. Attachment to pre-merger organizational backgrounds may, for this reason, jeopardize or challenge the process of making new cultural synergies within the new organizational reality. Accordingly, we assumed a 'group attachment effect' to appear in homogeneous groups of stayers with a threat potential towards new common cultural synergetic intervention.

3 Results

3.1 Patterns of cultural synergy

Seven discursive topics of cultural synergy processes were found. They were identified in group discussions as the generally and commonly appearing discourses and/or stories used by participants in discussing their community feeling. The topics were

- (1) *autonomy*: Freedom and flexibility to plan and structure work and work tasks,
- (2) *commitment*: Ambitions and engagements in work, workplace, and colleagues,
- (3) *management*: Managers, informative communication and training,
- (4) *office meetings*: Office gatherings of both professional and social relevancies,
- (5) *office space*: Geographical location, office location, and office space,
- (6) *social code*: Common shared standards and expectations for social behavior in the office, and
- (7) *workload*: Work pressure, work demands, and work procedures.

These seven topics greatly guided group discussions. However, variations among groups were identified. The topics of office meetings, office space, and commitment were dominant in the collective mindset of division office workers. Social code and workload were dominant in the collective mindset of head office workers. Figure 2 shows in terms of percentages how much these topics occurred in the whole sample and how dominant they were in head office as compared to division office workers (the dominance continuum depicted to the left hand side of figure 2).

Overall, social code and commitment were the two most dominating discourse topics and defined most cultural synergy processes. Social code and commitment have commonalities; however, we separated them because social code was found to reflect cultural aspects of social myth and mission, whereas commitment was found to be based on cultural standards of manifest codes and rules. Moreover, social code was identified as a dominant clerical group discourse (73%). Commitment (78%) and office space (83%) were identified as dominant in the division office. Due to the explorative and field nature of the study, more clerical workers appeared in the head office groups and more academic workers appeared in the division office groups. Thus, it is hard to say whether these identified differences represent office culture or the attitudes of clerical and academic caseworkers. However, it is interesting that the remaining five discourse topics showed no sensitivity to job position. This finding suggests that some facets of cultural synergy are independent from job position. In addition to this, themes of management and autonomy were topics equally important in both offices.

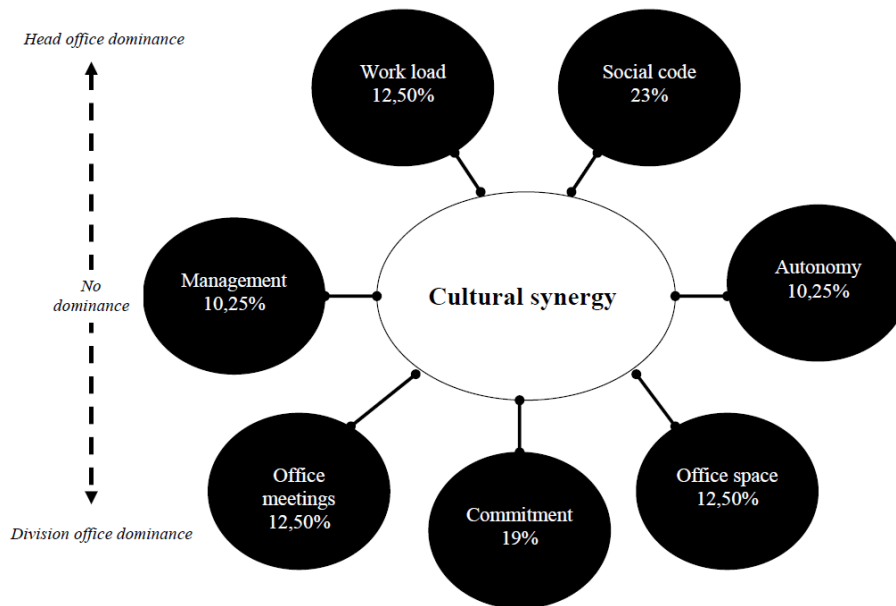


Figure 2: Level of dominance and occurrence of topics in the discussion.

3.2 Cultural Synergy in the change

Participants generally identified high workloads and geographical alienation as the main negative consequences of the merger. Interestingly, we also identified positive side effects such as new and improved work procedures and, for division office workers, a smaller unit. On the positive, or synergetic, side of workloads, the implementation of more collective work procedures was mentioned by participants as beneficial to their social climate and culture. On the negative side, feelings of stress and exhaustion were mentioned as impairing wellbeing and positive group climate. The synergetic character of office space was associated with benefits of being employed in a small division office unit where everyone knows each other and where office milieu allows sitting side by side with co-workers.

However, two main problems with office space were also revealed. First, as the number of employees within the division office had grown since the merger the office space was considered too small, contributing to a bad work climate. Second, since the division office was located more than 100km away from head office, the distance from top management and decision-making processes caused problems in the division office.

The identified synergy patterns relating to workload and office space may, however, reflect the potential of office cultures alongside the effect of change. The reason is that workload was the dominant head office discourse and office space the dominant division office discourse. Thus, office cultures may transcend the ways in which organizational change and wellbeing are defined and perceived; they thus should become the starting point of organizational development.

3.3 The 'we-effect' of cultural synergy

Calculating percentages of 'I' and 'we' pronouns used in homogeneous and heterogeneous group discussions confirmed our expectation. A relatively higher frequency of 'we' pronouns (64%) in comparison to 'I' (36%) was revealed in homogeneous group discussions. In heterogeneous groups 'I' and 'we' were not used significantly different (51% 'I' pronouns and 49% 'we' pronouns). In order to reassure the significance of this structure, a chi-square test (χ^2) on 'I' and 'we' occurrences in the two groups was conducted.

The null hypothesis was that the counts of 'I' and 'we' were independent from organizational background. The chi-square test (χ^2), table 2 below, gave a test value of 70.56. We used the formula for the expected values for the probability of the joint occurrence of two independent givens in our case the occurrences of "I" and "we" within group discussions.

$$E_{ij} = \frac{R_i C_j}{N}$$

E_{ij} = expected frequency for a given cell in rows. R_i = row total, C_j = Column total, N = the total number of observations. The values that result (showed in parentheses) are those that would be expected if the variables were independent and the null hypothesis was true. A large discrepancy in the fit between expected and observed values would reflect a departure from independence, which is what we want to test.

We made calculation of chi-square (χ^2) where O = observed values and E = expected values based upon the following chi-square (χ^2) formula:

$$\chi^2 = \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$$

The chi-square distribution with one degree of freedom revealed that in order to reject the null hypothesis with error probability $p < .005$ the value had to be equal to, or larger than, 7.88. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. Focus group participants with a shared pre-merger organizational background had a collective point of view in their discussions and used 'I' less frequently than 'We'. Heterogeneous groups used 'I' more than 'We'. Our interpretation is that the recorded focus group data reflect less cultural synergy in heterogeneous groups than in homogeneous groups.

Table 2: Chi-square test (χ^2) for a two dimensional contingency table of 'we' and 'I' used in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups respectively.

	'We' total	'I' total	Total Σ
<i>Homogeneous groups</i>	814 (700)	455 (573)	1269
<i>Heterogeneous groups</i>	987 (1107)	1020 (906)	2007
<i>Total Σ</i>	1801	1475	3266

3.4 The 'group attachment effect' of cultural synergy

Due to confounding office structures (head and division offices) and office biographies/cultures (including job qualifications on academic versus cleric position) our interpretation has some uncertainty: the results probably suggest differences in terms of cultural synergy between heterogeneous and homogeneous groups, but could also be influenced by confounders. This is a problem of our recruitment and segment design since heterogeneous groups are overly represented in the head office, while the homogeneous groups are the dominant division office groupings. However, either way, our findings show that cultural synergies are present within different groups of employees and, indeed, structure discourses and themes of relevance within the organization.

In order to test our assumption that organizational mergers pose a threat to cultural synergy, we considered whether it was office cultures or organizational backgrounds that mainly guided the cultural synergy patterns identified. If office culture is the main cultural synergy guideline for group discussions, then an organizational merger is no serious threat to cultural synergy. Office culture would then show stronger than the change event. If, on the other hand, organizational backgrounds (i.e. group attachments) are the dominant guideline, we would find support for our assumption of a 'group attachment effect' of cultural synergy. The 'group attachment effect' may explain why mergers potentially foster a desynchronized culture and, as a result, cultural crisis to the organization.

We conducted a content-based count of agreement-levels. We measured the degree to which participants' post-its within each group task session covered the same topics. We interpreted the emergence of different topics from different group members as a low level of homogeneity, and vice versa. Agreement, we assumed, is associated with post-it overlaps between focus group members and reflect cultural synergies. If no difference appeared between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, this would strongly indicate an office culture effect rather than a group attachment effect and we would reject our hypothesis. Table 3 illustrates the degree to which post-its overlap on topics within the focus groups.

Table 3: Measured agreement-levels on post-its among participants in groups (in percentages).

Homogeneous groups:	Agreement-levels :	
	Group no 2	48%
	Group no 6	38%
	Group no 7	40%
	Group no 8	39%
Heterogeneous groups:		
	Group no 1	00%
	Group no 3	20%
	Group no 4	21%
	Group no 5	28%

Table 3 shows higher agreement levels among homogeneous groups compared to heterogeneous groups. Calculating probabilities for the homogenous groups to have the four highest percentage levels showed to be significant on a two-tailed probability test ($p = .014$). Thus, we find support for our assumption that organizational background or group attachment dominate cultural synergy patterns.

4 Discussion

Mergers are change events that have the potential to disturb already established cultures and synergies within the targeted organizations. Different organizational backgrounds mix and match in the requirement to create a new, corporate culture. In this sense, organizational mergers are often cultural crises. It is very important that the merger makes sense to the employees to prevent psychological satiation, the negative emotional and arousal state due to experienced lack of the meaning of work. Mergers should support organizational development and psychological growth, despite and because they are often experienced as crises.

Establishing cultural alignment and common social codes are difficult processes, which take time. Our data point to the fact that the processes of forming a common shared community feeling are still in progress years after the merger, indicating that the merging process is not closed when management announces it is.

Indeed, our analysis shows that a more collective mindset seems to be present among employees sharing an organizational background in spite of new organizational settlements and arrangements, i.e. the 'group attachment effect' of cultural synergy. Thus, cultural synergy effects after a merger may take their time to settle in, leaving an open space for potential cultural and social conflicts to emerge and interfere with both organizational performance and employee wellbeing.

The employees in the merged organization may experience cultural crises as threatening. Since resources are spent on conflicts and frustrations instead of solutions and innovation, they bear risks for organizational performance. However, our data also show that conflicts and frustrations can be transformed into solutions and innovation. Many interventions during organizational change focus on establishing a commonly shared culture through the establishment of common shared values and goals for the new organization. Our study suggests a different route: Common work practices and work procedures offer practical ways of establishing culture sharing and cultural synergy. Talking about values and goals and writing them down in company policies may create some common grounds of reference within the organization. However, we believe such policymaking is of prime use to management and shareholders, not to the workforce. Cultural synergies must be lived and not only written in policies. Moreover, different groups of employees may have very different requirements within the new common culture. Our study revealed a tendency for pre-merger organizational backgrounds to interfere with perceptions and understandings of a new corporate culture. Thus, agreeing on the newly-shared culture, desired by employer and employees alike, starts at a policy level. Employees must be involved in the process in order to facilitate cultural synergies up and down the organization. Our results suggest that developing a new and common work procedure offers the chance to also foster community feeling and cultural synergy. For this reason, the new work procedure should have 1) a valid purpose, i.e. to make sense, for example, by diminishing high workload, and 2) it must be community based, e.g. by establishing shared work tasks and work assignments. Thus, the new procedure offers practical and social value at the same time.

Peaks of workload compromise community feelings since there is no time for co-worker interaction. Inadequate workload also compromises employee health and wellbeing since employees face the potential threat of stress and exhaustion. Thus, individual and organizational performances are at risk. However, our study revealed that in the face of an excessive workload a social spirit also could emerge. This spirit and feeling can be used to generate collective solutions to the collective problem, e.g. adding on a new and more collectively oriented work procedure, rather than to segmenting individual problems and frustrations. In this process, cultural synergy potentials emerge for the benefit of the individual and organization. Leadership plays a crucial role here (Vogt & Schnee, 2012).

This is not to undermine the individual employee's feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction created in the wake of a merger event.

On the contrary, this offers organizational and social solutions to problems which were not individually generated or caused but organizationally and socially originated. Synergy can be found in a corporate solution which provides a win-win situation for employer and employees.

A win-win-win-win situation for employees, employers, scientists, and the general public we see also in the use of focus group data. However, within the last 10-15 years there has been an intensified discussion on the ethics of collecting and using focus group data for research purposes (Krueger & Casey, 2008; Morgan, 1997). Critics of focus group methodology believe such data generation violates both informed consent and privacy issues, such as the individual's right to confidentiality and anonymity. We agree about the importance of ensuring ethical integrity and data protection. For this study, this was ensured through reference to the ethics committee of Copenhagen University.

Focus groups are a challenge to data protection, because it is very difficult to keep what is said confidential. We believe our task design solved the major problems. First, it associated not with the single person in the group but with the group as a whole.

Second, using post-it notes gave the individual the possibility to express personal feelings and understandings to the researcher without having to display such feeling and understanding to the group, since it was up to each participant's own decision which post-it notes to present in the group and which not. Third, since the focus groups were small in terms of size, each participant was granted the proper space and time to express him- or herself. Fourth, each participant was informed both verbally and in writing about the study and the related ethical issues before they agreed to participate. All participants voluntarily gave written consent before taking part in group discussions.

Another critical issue is data validity. Focus group methodology is not valid for all research purposes. However, in our opinion focus group data cannot be seen as invalid per se, as some opponents suggest. What can be seen as invalid in focus group data, though, is associated with the same problems as any qualitative data, which are mainly problems of reliability and generalization. Within our study we found consistent and partly significant, and thus valid, results on the presence of collective mindsets within homogeneous groups.

We therefore hope to see more and improved studies of this kind investigating how conflicts and frustrations can be transformed to find creative solutions for the benefit of individuals and organizations.

5 References

- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thoms, M., & Robson, K. (2001). *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage.
- Boyd, C. (2002). Customer violence and employee health and safety. *Work, employment and society*, 16, 151-169.
- Charmez, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Fairclough, N. (2005). Discourse Analysis in Organization Studies: The Case for Critical Realism. *Organization Studies*, 26, 915-939.
- Gabler (2013). *Gabler Wirtschaftslexikon*, Stichwort: Unternehmenskultur. <http://wirtschaftslexikon.gabler.de/Archiv/55073/unternehmenskultur-v6.html>.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Groseschl, S. & Doherty, L. (2000). Conceptualising culture. *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 7, 12-17.
- Halkier, B. (2010). Fokusgrupper. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds.), *Kvalitative metoder. En grundbog* (pp. 121-135). Copenhagen, Denmark: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Harkness, A. M. B., Long, B. C., Bermbach, N., Patterson, K., Jordan, S., & Kahn, H. (2005). Talking About Work Stress: Discourse Analysis and Implications for Stress Intervention. *Work & Stress*, 19, 121-136.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Hollnagel, E., Woods, D. D. & Leveson, N. (2006). *Resilience Engineering*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Holstein, J. A. & Gubrium, J. F. (2005). Interpretive practice and social action. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 483-505). London: Sage.
- Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet (2005). *Kommunalreformen. - Kort fortalt*. http://www.sm.dk/data/Lists/Publikationer/Attachments/271/kommunalreformen_kort_fortalt.pdf.
- Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet (2006). *Overdragelse af økonomiske ressourcer som følge af ændret geografisk inddeling og ændret opgavefordeling*. <http://www.sm.dk/data/Dokumentertilpublikationer/IM/Kommunalreformens%20gennemf%C3%B8relse%20-%20en%20status/kap02.htm>.
- Kastner, M. (2006). Vertrauensfehlerlern-innovationsgesundheitskultur – Praxisanleitung zur friedfertigen und ökonomischen Kooperation. *Vortrag auf der Frühjahrstagung der Bundesanstalt Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin*, 29. und 30.05.06, Dortmund.
- Kinman, G. & Jones, F. (2005). Lay representations of workplace stress: What do people really mean when they say they are stressed? *Work & Stress*, 19, 101-120.
- Köper, B. & Richter, G. (2012). Restrukturierung in Organisationen und mögliche Auswirkungen auf die Mitarbeiter. Dortmund: *Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin*. <http://www.baua.de/de/Publikationen/Fachbeitraege/artikel27.html>.
- Kotter, J. P. & Cohen, D. (2002). *The Heart of Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Krueger, R. A. & Casey, M. A. (2008). *Focus Groups. A practical guide for applied research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lewin, K. (1958). Group decisions and social change. In E. E. Maccoby, T. M. Newcomb, & E. L. Hartley (eds.): *Readings in social psychology* (pp. 197-221). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Länsisalmi, H., Peiró, J. M., & Kivimäki, M. (2000). Collective stress and coping in the context of organizational culture. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 9, 527-559.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Making Good Sense: Drawing and Verifying Conclusions. In M. B. Miles & A. M. Huberman (Eds.): *Qualitative Data Analysis* (pp. 245-287). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. New York: Sage.
- Patankar, M. S., Brown, J. P. Sabin, E. J. & Bigda-Peyton, T. (2010). *Safety Culture: Building and Sustaining a Cultural Change in Aviation and Health Care*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.
- Schein, E. H. (1990). Organizational culture. *American Psychologist*, 45, 109-119.
- Strauss, A. L. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Strøbæk, P. S. (2011). Zones of emotional labour: An explorative study among Danish public family law workers. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*, 4, 178-194.
- Thomas, A. (2003). Theoretische Grundlagen interkultureller Kommunikation und Kooperation. In A.

Thomas, E.-U. Kinast & S. Schroll-Machl (eds.): *Handbuch Interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kooperation*. Band 1: Grundlagen und Praxisfelder. Göttingen: Vandenoek & Ruprecht.

Tsoukas, H. & Chia, R. (2002). On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Change. *Organization Science*, 13, 567-582.

Triandis, H. C. (1989). Intercultural Education and Training. In: P. Funke (ed.): *Understanding the US – A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Tübingen: Günter Narr.

Trompenaars, F. (1993): *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity*. London: Economist Books.

Vogt, J., Leonhardt, J. Köper, B. & Pennig, S. (2004). Economic evaluation of the Critical Incident Stress Management Program. *The International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*, 6, 185-196.

Vogt, J., Pennig, S. & Leonhardt, J. (2007). Critical Incident Stress Management in air traffic control and its benefits. *Air Traffic Control Quarterly*, 15, 127-156.

Vogt, J. & Schnee, M. (2012). Führung als Moderator von Gesundheit, Absentismus und Präsentismus bei Restrukturierungsprozessen [Leadership as a moderator of health, absenteeism and presenteeism in restructuring processes]. *Zeitschrift für Arbeitswissenschaft*, 66, 269-276.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Pernille S. Strøbæk
Department of Psychology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Copenhagen
Room 30-1-04
Oester Farimagsgade 2A
1353 Copenhagen C.
DENMARK

Pernille.Stroebaek@psy.ku.dk