

Organizational culture and its significance for knowledge sharing

A case study on a psychiatric health care organization



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Abstract

- Title:** Organizational culture and its significance for knowledge sharing - A case study on a psychiatric health care organization
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- Submission date:** May 20th, 2016
- Purpose:** The purpose of our research is to understand what significance organizational culture can have for knowledge sharing.
- Methodology:** We base our thesis on a qualitative research design and take an interpretative stance.
- Theoretical:** Our theoretical foundation is built on literature and research regarding; organizational culture and identity, knowledge, knowledge management and knowledge sharing.
- Empirical foundation:** Our empirical material is based on ten semi-structured interviews and two formal observations made on a public psychiatric outpatient organization in Sweden. The ten interviews cover each of the seven professions represented at the health care organization.
- Main findings:** The identified organizational culture at the health care organization can be seen as supporting a continuous sharing of knowledge. However, we have also identified that the culture risks leading to some undesirable effects such as conformism and fragmentation, and thus supports a rather homogeneous behaviour of knowledge sharing. These risks can make the organization alien for dissidents and resistant to new ideas, alternatives and knowledge.
- Keywords:** Organizational Culture, Organizational Identity, Knowledge, Knowledge Management, Knowledge Sharing

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In a deserted resort, located between two major cities in Sweden, lies a psychiatric clinic that we would like to call Accio due to promised anonymity. At Accio, patients schedule meetings and take visits for therapy treatment. It is an outpatient organization, which means that patients do not need to be admitted to a hospital and the therapeutic procedures are thus done at Accio voluntarily. Twenty-five employees work at Accio and represent seven professions; psychologist, psychiatrist, physiotherapist, social worker, occupational therapist, medical secretary and psychiatric nurse. These professions require several years of academic education and all employees are said to possess a high degree of knowledge connected to their professional roles. In other words, their knowledge in general and their professional knowledge in particular play an important role in their daily work with patients.

The employees work in a relatively autonomous way, which means that they take many decisions based on their own judgments without directives from the management. Their profession requires them to work independently. However, they also work in teams and often need to depend on each other when dealing with different responsibilities regarding the same patient. Even though they work independently to some extent, the employees are required to communicate and share knowledge with each other when working together in many patient cases. This calls for an efficient knowledge sharing, which is the process where people transfer and create new knowledge together (Riviera-Vazquez et al., 2009).

Literature and research on knowledge sharing have long been dominated by technical challenges, where the focus often lies on improving knowledge sharing and reuse of knowledge through IT solutions and IT-systems (Alvesson 2004; McDermott, 1999, Swan et al., 1999). However, the most important knowledge is difficult to capture and codify through such systems and rather calls for in-depth understanding (Alvesson, 2004). It is argued that knowledge cannot simply be processed through IT-systems. Instead, knowledge needs to be constantly re-created in interactive and social

networking processes that involves people to exchange knowledge. In turn, this means that people create new knowledge and share their interpretations of knowledge with each other through social interactions (Swan et al., 1999).

Although it is important for organizations to build information systems, it is far more important to build communities that cross disciplines, time and business units (McDermott, 1999). Communities are defined as groups of people creating mutual trust and developing shared beliefs when working together (Alvesson, 2004). The social relations are important and the relationships within communities play a big part in how people interact and share knowledge with each other (Wenger, 1998). Knowledge sharing is usually a consequence of communities, since the people working together share and transfer knowledge in order to accomplish a shared goal. Communities are based on bottom-up agreement and commitment, which means that they are created by people joining together rather than as a result of initiatives from management (Alvesson, 2004).

Organizational culture can be viewed as the heart of social knowledge processes (Alvesson, 2004). The key to creating new knowledge is personal commitment and people's identification with the organization (Starkey, 1996). Shared understandings and values concerning knowledge and collaboration together with a feeling of belongingness and a shared identification with the organization are essential for knowledge sharing. The desire to take time to respond to and help other people and collaborate can be seen as outcomes of an organizational culture. Creating and developing an organizational culture that facilitates cooperative work and a well-functioning organization could be a way of maximizing human process advantage, instead of focusing on systems and standardized practices (Alvesson, 2004). Therefore, we find it interesting to study organizational culture and its significance for knowledge sharing.

At Accio, there seems to be some distinctive characteristics that the organization asks for in their employees. The employees tend to identify themselves with these characteristics and Accio's organizational culture. This identification and the organizational culture appear to play a big part in how people interact with each other and are significant for the knowledge sharing at Accio. The organizational culture

encourages people to be open toward each other and to help colleagues in need. The knowledge is shared extensively based on some kind of collective understanding that knowledge sharing is a matter of course. Accio seems to have created a collective culture, where people are encouraged to work together and solve issues as a team. This puts emphasis on the employees to share their knowledge with each other. Even though the employees can be regarded as experts in their own professions, they are forced to work together and work in a rather collective way instead of being individualistic. The organizational culture and knowledge sharing are seen as central in the employees' daily work life. We want to further explore this in order to get an in-depth understanding of what significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing.

1.2 Problem statement

The inability to share what employees know and what they have experienced in healthcare organizations characterized by close collaboration can affect the work carried out in a negative way, leading to inefficient processes and increased patient queues. A culture that does not enable nor encourage employees to share knowledge among each other can cause a potential lack of cohesion and interest between colleagues. Also, an efficient knowledge sharing may prevent colleagues from repeatedly inventing the wheel over and over again. Creating, adapting and maintaining a culture that facilitates knowledge sharing among employees may thus be seen as crucial in order for organizations to stay competitive (Alvesson 2004; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Davenport et al., 1998; Pfeffer, 1994).

However, there are always two sides to every story. A significant organizational culture that supports a rather homogeneous behavior may lead to group thinking. In turn, group thinking risks making organizations alien for dissidents and resistant to new ideas, alternatives and knowledge (Janis, 1972). A culture that for example risks discouraging qualified professionals from joining the organization would be problematic. The healthcare industry is characterized by long patient queues and professions in shortage and can thus not afford to alienate themselves. From this perspective, creating, adapting and maintaining a culture that facilitates knowledge sharing among employees can be seen as crucial but also ambiguous. This ambiguity calls for an understanding of what significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing.

1.3 Research aim and research question

We aim to understand what significance organizational culture can have on sharing of knowledge. To fulfil this purpose, we chose the following research question:

- What significance can organizational culture play for knowledge sharing in organizations?

Doing a case study from an interpretative stance gives us the possibility to create an in-depth understanding of the significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing based on the employees' perceptions. The answers and the findings in this thesis will be of interest from a managerial point of view and for researchers interested in organizational culture and knowledge sharing. We have had no intent to find and present any best practices. Instead, we aim to create an understanding of the studied phenomena. In order to gain a deep understanding and achieve a high credibility, we have been reflexive and problematized our findings, methodological choices and results throughout the process.

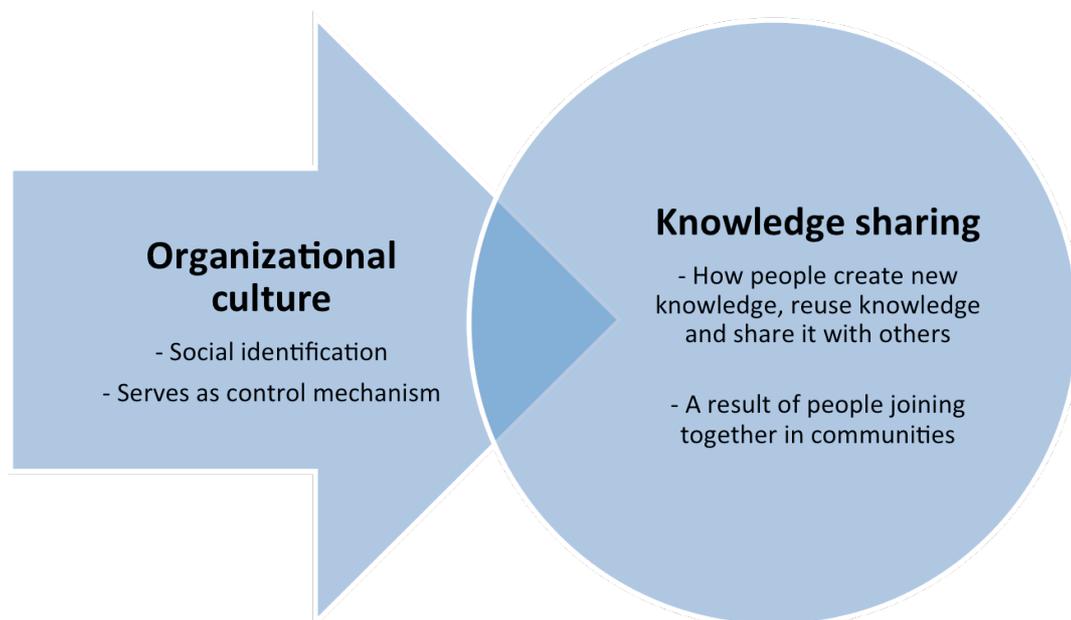
1.4 Outline of the Thesis

Five chapters follow the introductory chapter; literature review, methodology, the story about Accio, discussion and lastly, the conclusion. In the literature review we will present an overview of the existing research theory that are relevant regarding organizational culture and knowledge sharing. In the third chapter we present our methodological choices in terms of meta-theoretical starting point, research design, data collection and data analysis. Additionally, we point out our reflections and limitations regarding our methodological choices. In the story about Accio we initially present our studied case, its general characteristics and its context. Furthermore, we clarify our findings identified from the empirical material that are linked to our research question. The findings are elaborated in the same chapter, where we also relate the findings to existing literature. In the subsequent discussion we develop our arguments and reasoning as we answer our research question. Lastly, we end the thesis with

concluding remarks, practical implications, general limitations and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

In this chapter we present and explore the relevant literature and research on organizational culture and identity, knowledge in general and professional knowledge in particular. We also present knowledge management and its challenges. Knowledge sharing is shown as an objective of knowledge management and the conditions for knowledge sharing are highlighted. Finally, we connect the presented concepts and explore what existing literature says about the significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing.



2.1 Organizational culture and identity

Today, the skills of the employees are often said to be great sources of competitive advantage (Alvesson, 2004; Pfeffer, 1994). How people work and how they are managed affect the success or failure of an organization (Pfeffer, 1994). In contemporary organizations characterized by high levels of knowledge, it is difficult for managers to directly control what employees do due to the complexity of the work being done and because the knowledge workers are used to work autonomously. Instead, indirect control through organizational culture and identity is essential when

trying to manage employees in such firms (Alvesson, 2004). The organizational culture and the capabilities of the employees are affected by how they are managed and therefore training and skill development of the work force are crucial. As a result, organizations often aim to build strong cultures in order to develop and retain their skilled employees (Pfeffer, 1994).

Organizational culture

Literature highlight that the core of an organizational culture are the shared values among employees and the feeling of group identity (Alvesson, 2004; Hofstede et al., 1990; Schein, 2010). Organizational culture is characterized by shared perceptions of daily work tasks and practices, since people learn organizational practices through socialization (Hofstede et al., 1990). Culture is created and constantly evolving through interactions between people and people can shape the culture by their own behavior. A culture creates conditions for people to use a common language and as a result, language can provide people meaning in their daily work life (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Schein, 2010).

Culture can be explained as an abstract concept that entails four characteristics; *structural stability*, *depth*, *breadth* and *patterning or integration* (Schein, 2010). Firstly, culture define groups, is hard to change and provides meaning and thus gives a structural stability. Secondly, culture is often an unconscious part of a group, deeply embedded and less visible. Thirdly, culture has breadth since it affects all functioning of a group. Fourthly, culture involves certain values, behaviors and rituals that can be viewed as a pattern or integration (Schein, 2010). Several complementing characteristics of culture have also been identified by Hofstede et al. (1990) who argue that culture is; comprehensive and integrates a big group of people, is historically related and transferred through customs, is hard to change since people do not let go of their values and understandings very easily, socially constructed, soft, associated with symbols and is a way of thinking (Hofstede et al. 1990).

Subcultures can exist in organizations as a part of the general organizational culture. People often identify with subcultures that reflect their occupations and thus adopt norms and values that comes with it. Subcultures often share many beliefs that the

organization holds, but not necessarily all of them and can be created as a result of similar education backgrounds, common tasks or related organizational experience (Schein, 2010).

To summarize, culture can be determined as a group's shared assumptions that handles external and internal challenges well enough to be accepted as the right way of thinking and feeling. A group that has a culture will transfer components of the culture to new generations of group members (Hofstede et al. 1990; Schein, 2010). People's behaviors can be expressed and communicated in the culture and refer to the beliefs people hold and "is thus behind and beneath behavior" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015, p. 38).

Organizational identity

People can identify themselves with different groups, organizations or other groupings (Alvesson, 2004) and people tend to judge other people depending on what group they belong to (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When talking about organizational culture and its potential significance on how people interact with each other, it is important to bring up organizational identity since organizational culture is not influential itself if people do not identify themselves with the culture to some extent (Alvesson, 2004). People's identities include the ability to shape meanings and understandings that determines people's forms of belonging (Wenger, 1998). According to social identity theory, people can be classified in different categories. This social classification structures the social environment where people define both themselves and other people. People often base their understandings of other people according to what category they belong to and thus assign them the typical characteristics of that category.

Social identification can be explained as a feeling of belongingness with a certain group of people and should not be mistaken for internalization. Social identification is related to putting yourself in a social category while internalization is about embodying values and beliefs according to your social category. A person can identify himself or herself with a group or an organization without fully embracing all of the values or systems that comes with it. Organization is a form of social identification and people can identify themselves not only with an organization, but also with different departments, teams or age cohorts, to mention a few. However, people tend to identify themselves

with groups that can distinguish themselves by being distinctive or prestigious (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Culture and identity as a form of control

Culture and identity can be linked together since identity mirrors images of other people, expresses cultural understandings, reflects an embedding of identity in culture and leaves an impression of expressed identity on others (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Organizations can use identity-focused control in their aspirations to manage knowledge through *organizational identity*, *cultural control* and *subjectification*. Organizations can create and strengthen an organizational identity by hiring employees that have many things in common in terms of similar education, class background and characteristics. As a result of such recruitment, homogeneous groups of people with same values are created in the organization. If they identify with the organization the organizational identity will be reinforced (Alvesson, 2004).

Organizations can use organizational culture as means to control members of an organization (Alvesson, 2004). Common and shared values, beliefs and understanding influence people and contributes guidelines. Jargons, stories and certain practices are examples of symbolic management used in organizations to guide them in what the management believes is the right direction (Alvesson 2004; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Subjectification is the process of creating a self-image to the extent that people obtain and accept certain definitions of themselves, which will guide and structure them in the organization. The organization can try to align employees' self-images through feedback and talking of expected characteristics and behaviors that they hold (Alvesson, 2004).

The studied organization in our case demands its employees to have a great amount of knowledge, because in order to work in at the psychiatric ward Accio it takes a strong academic background. Coming from such a background, it would be fair to say that the employees working at Accio have acquired knowledge throughout their years in school and at work. Thus, it is important to talk about an further explain knowledge, how to manage knowledge, knowledge sharing and how people can unite in so called communities. This leads us into the section about knowledge work.

2.2 Knowledge work

This section covers the basics of knowledge, knowledge-intensive firms, knowledge management and knowledge sharing. We also touch upon communities, where knowledge sharing is shown as a consequence of people working closely together in order to achieve a shared goal.

Knowledge

Knowledge is a broad and ambiguous concept and the underlying assumptions about knowledge differ between people and organizations (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Alvesson, 2004). Knowledge covers the capability to interpret, assess and draw conclusions from gathering of data and information. The main struggle with conceptualizing knowledge is that it is hard to draw a line between what should and what should not be included when talking about knowledge. Some may argue that knowledge includes cultural and interpersonal knowledge, while others may refer to knowledge as experience related subjects (Alvesson, 2004).

Knowledge can be divided into tacit or explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is experience related and hard to put into words while explicit knowledge is formalized and easier to explain and express (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Nonaka, 1994). It is important to acknowledge that knowledge can mean different things to different people. However, there is a potential risk with trying to cover and include too much in the term knowledge without losing its meaning (Alvesson, 2004). Knowledge can be embedded in techniques and practices and is rooted in the work culture which affects the cognitive skills of the work force. If knowledge is incorporated into the organizational culture, it can be difficult to copy and it can thus potentially contribute to the competitive advantage (Alvesson, 2004). Knowledge needs to be recognized and understood by others in order to be meaningful and many researchers highlight that knowledge development rely on social interaction (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al. 2009, Nonaka, 1994).

Knowledge can be broken down to professional knowledge, which is knowledge related to a certain profession or craft. It is based on cognitive and theory-guided activities bound to professions. Professional knowledge is a well-written topic and its increased

focus has arisen during the recent decades, in parallel to the development and growth of knowledge-intensive firms (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson, 2004). Knowledge-intensive firms are further explained below.

Knowledge-Intensive Firms

Knowledge-intensive firms can be defined as organizations offering knowledge-based products or services. The activities used to produce these products or services are based on the intellectual skills or theory-based knowledge of the work force. Examples of knowledge-intensive firms are health care organizations, consultancy firms or law firms. Employees in knowledge-intensive firms often have an academic background, which may indicate that they have competence and thus it legitimizes their status of expertise. In knowledge-intensive firms, a substantial knowledge base and continuous competence development are important. Employees face a high level of complexity of their work tasks and in work situations and thus it is likely that ambiguity is a central aspect of their work.

Knowledge-intensive firms are characterized by a high degree of autonomy among the workforce, where they are free to make their own judgments since they possess the expertise and skills needed in their profession. Management in knowledge-intensive firms is a question of managing people and culture. Knowledge intensive firms are characterized by normative control to a greater extent compared to what is typical in most other organizations. Normative control influences the beliefs, assumptions and subjectivities people hold and is thus an indirect way of managing employees. Also, knowledge-intensive firms can benefit from creating a strong social cohesion and organizational identity that unite members of the organization. Knowledge-intensive firms call for communities of practice, care and a culture that supports sharing and support (Alvesson, 2004). Thus, if management in knowledge-intensive firms includes organizational culture, it is important to consider how the organizational culture affects the people working in the organization.

Knowledge management

How efficiently organizations manage knowledge can be the difference between success and failure (Davenport et al. 1998). Knowledge management covers processes

that are both specific and interdependent, for example creation of knowledge, storing of knowledge and sharing of knowledge. Knowledge management is dynamic and complex (Alavi & Leidner, 2001) and thus a flexible and emerging organizational structure is preferable in order to facilitate efficient knowledge management (Davenport et al. 1998). It has been questioned if knowledge really can be managed. The concept of knowledge is extensive and ambiguous and can be interpreted differently by different people. It can be difficult to manage and control knowledge, because when management talk about knowledge they sometimes reduce the meaning of knowledge to simply information (Alvesson, 2004).

Knowledge management can be divided into two different strategies; codification and personalization. Codification focus on how to codify and store knowledge with the main belief that personal knowledge can be converted into computers. On the other hand, personalization focus on how knowledge can be shared through direct interaction with people. The assumption is that people share knowledge in the right circumstances (Alvesson, 2004).

Knowledge management literature and research seems to be dominated by the technical challenges concerning knowledge management, where the focus often lies on improving knowledge sharing and reuse of knowledge through IT solutions and IT-systems (Alvesson, 2004; McDermott, 1999; Swan et al., 1999). Technical challenges regarding knowledge management include how to structure databases, communication systems and IT-systems in order to enable efficient knowledge transfer (McDermott, 1999). When facing these technical challenges, researchers tend to take an engineering perspective to explain and solve these issues. This engineering focus highlights the need for increasing formalization, standardization and centralization while preventing building relationships and interaction. However, the most important knowledge is difficult to capture and codify through such systems and rather calls for in-depth understanding (Alvesson, 2004).

With that said, the softer parts of knowledge management are still somewhat underdeveloped in terms of in-depth empirical studies. Relations, flexibility, openness and trust are significant for knowledge management, but relatively little has been studied on that area (Alvesson, 2004). Although it is important for organizations to build information systems, it is far more important to build communities that cross

disciplines, time and business units (McDermott, 1999). It is argued that knowledge cannot simply be processed through IT-systems. Knowledge needs to be constantly re-created in interactive and social networking processes that involves people to exchange knowledge. In turn, this means that people create new knowledge and share their interpretations of knowledge with each other (Swan et al., 1999).

Knowledge Sharing

The ability to constantly share the knowledge of employees can be a potential source to sustainable competitive advantage for organizations (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Riege, 2005). It is said that the core activity of an organization that wants to create new knowledge is to make personal knowledge available to others (Starkey, 1996). Knowledge sharing is the process where employees transfer tacit and explicit knowledge as well as create new knowledge together in order to convert individual knowledge into organizational knowledge (Rivera-Vazquez et al. 2009). Explicit knowledge is often more easy to share compared to tacit knowledge that is harder to capture and thus transfer (Alvesson, 2004).

There are many potential barriers that are important to consider and overcome in order to facilitate knowledge sharing. Various combinations can be found in organization and they are often intertwined. For example low recognition of the importance and benefit of possessed knowledge to others, a shortage in time to share knowledge or more focus on sharing explicit knowledge over tacit knowledge (Riege, 2005). Factors that motivate organizational members to use and share knowledge are essential (Davenport et al. 1998). Earlier case studies on implementation processes for late-career nurses and recruits have been done, resulting in different models for knowledge sharing and transferring. Also, it was shown that a helpful context supporting knowledge sharing and transferring makes it possible for an organization to transfer both explicit and tacit knowledge (Harvey, 2012).

Communities

People can learn to share knowledge through social participation, where they are active and engage in activities with other people in social communities and by constructing identities in relation to their communities (Wenger, 1998). Communities are defined as

groups of people creating mutual trust and developing shared beliefs when working together (Alvesson, 2004). As people define other people, they socially interact collectively. The social relations are important and thus the relationships within communities play a big part in how people will interact with each other and share knowledge (Wenger, 1998). Knowledge sharing is usually a consequence of communities, since the people working together share and transfer knowledge in order to accomplish a shared goal. Communities are based on bottom-up agreement and commitment, which means that they are created by people joining together rather than as a result of initiatives from management (Alvesson, 2004). Networking in communities emphasizes the significance of relationships and shared attitudes to knowledge sharing. IT-systems can either hinder or facilitate networking, and thus affect knowledge sharing (Swan et al., 1999).

2.3 Cultural significance for knowledge sharing

When talking about how people share knowledge with each other, it is meaningful to understand how an organizational culture can affect people's knowledge sharing (Riviera-Vazquez et al. 2009). Creating a culture that facilitates knowledge sharing needs to be supported by employees, the organizational structure and its practices (Riege, 2005). Knowledge sharing processes usually fail since organizations try to adapt their culture to fit their knowledge management or knowledge sharing, rather than implementing them to fit their culture. Thus, it is important that knowledge sharing is integrated in employees daily communication and work life (Riege, 2005). The willingness to share knowledge is based on how positively employees perceive attitudes towards knowledge sharing and the norms for sharing in the organization (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005).

Organizational strategies and objectives need to be central to the organizational culture (Riege, 2005). The success of the culture's significance on knowledge sharing depends on the synergy of the three following factors; Firstly, organizations must motivate and facilitate employees to share and apply existing and new knowledge. Secondly, the organizational structure should be flat and open in order to create necessary conditions for processes of knowledge sharing and a learning organizational culture. Thirdly,

organizations need to provide a good platform where knowledge can be shared through the right technology supported by employees (Riege, 2005). Also, it is argued that an organizational culture that facilitates sharing in general will affect knowledge sharing behaviors directly. If employees perceive and interpret knowledge sharing norms and positive attitudes towards knowledge sharing, they will be affected indirectly by the organizational culture to share knowledge (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005).

De Long (1997) emphasizes four ways in which organizational culture affects knowledge sharing behaviors; Firstly, an organizational culture frame employee's beliefs of knowledge and if they believe knowledge is beneficial for the organization. Secondly, an organizational culture tries to bring individual knowledge into organizational knowledge. Thirdly, an organizational culture establishes the context in which organizational members socially interacts. Fourthly, an organizational culture forms the processes where new knowledge is created, legitimized and shared. Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to align their organizational culture to support and facilitate an efficient use of knowledge (De Long, 1997).

It is argued that an organizational culture can influence people to create and share knowledge (Davenport et al. 1998). Studies have been made on how organizations can minimize the potential loss of knowledge and retain knowledge. Findings of such studies have shown that knowledge retention can be successfully captured in three stages; defining the scope, documenting and integrating. Furthermore, if organizations can manage to facilitate an efficient knowledge retention, they can thus manage to minimize knowledge loss (Levy, 2011).

Organizational culture can be viewed as the heart of social knowledge processes (Alvesson, 2004). The key to creating new knowledge is personal commitment and people's identification with the organization (Starkey, 1996). Shared understandings and values concerning knowledge and collaboration together with a feeling of belongingness and a shared identification with the organization are essential for knowledge sharing. The desire to take time to respond to and help other people and collaborate with them can be seen as an outcome of an organizational culture. Creating and developing an organizational culture that facilitates cooperative work and a well-

functioning organization could be a way of maximizing human process advantage, instead of focusing on systems and standardized practices (Alvesson, 2004).

2.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter we have presented literature and research on organizational culture and how people can identify themselves with a culture. We have brought up knowledge in general and professional knowledge in particular. We presented knowledge management, where the main focus has been on technical challenges instead of relations and people's interactions with each other. Knowledge sharing was shown as an objective to knowledge management and knowledge sharing could also be viewed as a consequence of communities, where people unite and share knowledge in order to achieve a common goal. We also presented what existing literature says about how significant an organizational culture is for knowledge sharing. The softer parts of knowledge management still are somewhat underdeveloped in terms of in-depth empirical studies. Instead it seems to historically have been an emphasis on the technical challenges. We find it important to further explore what significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing, where people communicate and interact with each other not only through technical solutions like IT-systems.

3. Methodology

In this chapter we explain the critical and methodological choices made in conducting this thesis. The basis for our methodological choices lies in the meta-theoretical starting point, which will be presented in detail below. We further explain the chosen qualitative research design, followed by a description of the methods used in order to collect and analyze the data. We conclude the chapter by presenting our reflexive approach which was applied throughout the thesis process.

3.1 Metatheoretical starting point

The manner in which a research project is conducted depends largely on the researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions. These assumptions are summed up in paradigms and concerns regarding how the researcher views the reality of the truth and the nature. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and ontology is the theory of reality (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) argue that these two concepts are better managed in qualitative research since this research mode allows for ambiguity. Thus, they mean that qualitative research allows for interpretative possibilities and further exposition of the researcher's constructions.

We chose to conduct a qualitative research since we aim to create a deep understanding of how employees at the studied organization construct and make sense of their organizational culture and their sharing of knowledge (Merriam, 2002). We have gathered employees' subjective interpretations based on our ontological approach of reality, consisting of multiple interpretations and constructions rather than any objective truth. Thus, we find the interpretative paradigm to be the most relevant and appropriate for our study. The interpretative paradigm is based on social constructionism, multiple meanings (Merriam, 2002) and a view of the social world as having a great uncertain ontological status (Morgan, 1980). This paradigm allows us to analyse and get a view of the employees subjective understandings and perceptions of their organizational culture and their sharing of knowledge. Furthermore, choosing the interpretative paradigm also means considering that we as researchers have an impact on the study. It is therefore important to identify our own subjectivities and the

implications these may have on the collecting and analysing of data (Merriam, 2002). In section 3.4.1 below, we present an example of when reflexive interpretation enabled us to create awareness about our own subjectivities and to unlock some biased gridlocks.

3.2 Critical choice

We find Accio to be an adequate case to study in relation to our identified research question. The initial choice of research theme was sharing of professional knowledge and it was rationalized and facilitated by findings from our earlier thesis work (Aneheim Ulvenäs et al., 2014). Concerns had been raised from interviewed nurses in the former thesis. The nurses highlighted that their work-related knowledge were not being shared enough among present and future colleagues. The nurses stated that their departments and their organization risked missing out on a lot of valuable know-how and professional experience, as employees quit or in times of retirement. We chose to follow up this concern and investigate it further. However, the critical choice of our research case was developed through a more extensive process. Our choice of research subject, the public psychiatric outpatient organization, was made based on four requirements:

- We required access to certain material in order to study the case in depth. Without adequate access to empirical material no case study could be conducted.
- The organization had to be some kind of healthcare organization, in order to be aligned with the organization in which the concerns regarding insufficient sharing of knowledge initially were identified.
- The work conducted in the organization would have to be characterized by high levels of knowledge, to be aligned with the initial research theme.
- There would have to be some degree of formal as well as informal interpersonal encounters that would reflect the nature of the social context where the research theme first was identified.

All four requirements above were fulfilled by the chosen organization. They enabled us to answer our research question and to contribute to existing theory by empirically

and conceptually complementing the research on what significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing.

3.3 Research design

From our interpretive perspective, we consider organizational culture and sharing of knowledge to be based on social interactions and constructions. Thus, we found qualitative research method as the most appropriate choice in order to create a deep understanding of what significance culture can have on knowledge sharing. Our research subject is Accio, a public psychiatric outpatient organization in Sweden, and the data is derived from interviews and observations that form the basis of our analysis. The research process was initialized by taking contact with one of the employees at Accio. The employee had been an interviewee in the former bachelor thesis where the research theme of sharing knowledge first was identified. As the research idea was presented to her, she remembered the identified theme and promised to promote the research proposal within the organization. We provided her with a written presentation of the research proposal that she were to present at the next workplace conference. We chose to ask for interviewees with less than five years left until retirement. This was desirable because the nurses in the former thesis had emphasized the risks with employees leaving the organization, often due to retirement. In addition, we wanted all seven professions at Accio to be represented among our interviewees; psychologist, psychiatrist, physiotherapist, social worker, occupational therapist, medical secretary and psychiatric nurse. Subsequently, our former interviewee provided us with the contact details to eight persons that met our requests and were interested in participating in our study.

We constructed the interview questionnaire after our first contact with our contact person. Our pre-conceptions and pre-understandings helped us to create the guide based on the research theme, namely the sharing of knowledge. However, we made the questionnaire semi-structured with open-ended questions in order to enable us to identify interesting new themes by uncovering the employee's own perspectives (Kvale, 1996). The questionnaire was divided into four sections: personal background, the general atmosphere at Accio, the interviewees' own knowledge, and the sharing of knowledge at the organization (see appendix 1 & 2). Since our interviews were semi-

structured, we had the flexibility to go beyond the questionnaire and ask follow-up questions when we found it appropriate. Furthermore, after each interview, we were able to revise the follow-up questions continuously in order to pick up interesting and salient themes identified in the interview transcripts.

Early in the interview process, we noted how the interviewees to a great extent wanted to talk about knowledge sharing *in general*, rather than just the *sharing* of work-related knowledge. Professional knowledge was seen as a part of a more important whole at the organization. The importance of sharing not only work-related knowledge at Accio but also more general knowledge was emphasized. This perspective differed from the findings in the earlier thesis (Aneheim Ulvenäs et al., 2014) where solely the work-related knowledge was highlighted. We chose to take notice of this and revised our focus. Thus, we used the broader concept of knowledge throughout this thesis in order to stay as close to the empirical material as possible.

Additionally, in the first interviews we identified how the interviewees tended to talk about several normative behavioural aspects when asked about the sharing of knowledge at Accio. This identification of a cultural dimension in the employees' knowledge sharing made us formulate our research question. As the interviews were continuously conducted, we observed that not only knowledge sharing linked to retirement processes were of interest. Moreover, the general sharing of knowledge seemed to be a salient theme among the interviewees. This broadening of our research scope led us to contact two additional employees who were interested in participating but did not meet our initial interviewee requests. However, even though the two employees did not meet the age requirement, they had numerous years of experience within the psychiatry field as well as within the studied organization. Accordingly, we found them to be relevant and valuable samples in order to create an understanding of what significance culture can have on knowledge sharing (Merriam, 2002).

We conducted ten semi-structured interviews between January and February 2016, with an average time of 45 minutes. All interviews were performed face-to-face and nine of ten were performed at Accio. In scheduling time and place with the interviewees, we offered to come to Accio at whatever time that was most suitable for them, in order to facilitate for them to take smooth breaks in their daily work. One of the two additional

interviewees was a former employee at Accio. This former employee had recently started working full-time at a private clinic and consequently, we performed the interview at that clinic. Prior to the interviews, we asked and received permission of each interviewee to record the interviews in order to transcribe them afterwards. When asking for their permission to record the interviews, we assured them of anonymity for both themselves and their organization. This was done with the hope to create good conditions for honest answers and reasoning.

When the vast majority of the interviews had been conducted, we decided to enhance the credibility of our findings by complementing our qualitative research strategy and primary method of collecting data with support from another major source, namely observations (Merriam, 2002). We were given permission to attend two of Accio's weekly workplace conferences. Our aim was to study how the interviewees and their colleagues shared knowledge in practice. During the observations we were not able to record the meetings since all present employees had not given us the permission to do so. Instead, we were allowed to take field notes in order to facilitate the complementary data collection.

Limitations

In the subsequent chapters, we present shared and contrasting understandings about the organizational culture and its significance on knowledge sharing. We chose not to individualize the answers of the interviewees due to the fact that we received access to conduct this thesis based on the premises that we would keep the respondents anonymized. Even if we would have given the interviewees codified names in the following chapters, there would be a risk that their identities could be revealed due to the limited size of the organization, the unequal gender balance and the small amount of employees working in each profession at Accio. In our view, it would have been interesting to explicitly link the interviewees' sense-making with their identities, gender, profession and specific age *et cetera*. However, since access is essential in research we could not compromise on this aspect.

3.4 Data analysis

We performed a qualitative case study in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of a single case and to grasp subjective understandings from several participants. Our analysis process was based on an abductive approach and the post positivist qualitative interpretative frameworks of grounded theory and hermeneutics. We abductively became aware of our pre-conceptions, obtained from previous thesis works and academic courses, and identified the initial research theme. This prevented us from potential drawbacks, as in risking reinventing an already discovered wheel due to lack of insight into the research field (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

We started analysing the empirical material by using continuous grounded theory coding. We identified the four themes presented in the subsequent chapter based on our memo-writings and interview transcripts (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The continuous coding of collected data helped us to compare new empirical material with already identified categories. The application of the hermeneutic circle further helped us to move between our findings, our pre-understandings and the broader context of the organization (Prasad, 2005). This constant change of perspectives helped us to avoid being too focused on the separate parts and to lose understanding of the overall perspective. Moreover, it helped us to create awareness and to be reflective of our own pre-understandings and subjectivities. We will present a striking example of this reflexivity in the following section 3.5.1 below.

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, we sensed that we had yet not achieved credible empirical saturation. To address this concern, we broadened our empirical sampling on the basis of the emerging grounded theory. Therefore, we complemented the already performed interviews with observations. After the observations, we begun our in-depth analysis and identified interesting themes by marking up repetitions, similarities and differences in the interview transcripts and in our field notes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

3.5 Credibility and reflection

As a method of achieving credibility in the gathering and analyzing of empirical material, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) mention four aspects of source criticism;

1. To distinguish between unintended and intentional information
2. To be critical of the authenticity of the sources
3. To be critical of potential biases among the informants
4. To be critical about the distance and dependence of the information.

Source criticism concerns distortion of information and puts emphasis on the past. The only thing possible to study is contradictory and uncertain traces of the past, since the future is yet to come and the present becomes the past as soon as we begin to study it. As with all empirical material collected through interviews, the intentional information we have gathered is narrating sources. These narrating sources are considered to be of a lesser value than unintended remnants in a source-critical evaluation. Accordingly, we chose to complement the interviews with on-site observations. Regarding the aspect of authenticity of the sources we ensured credibility by coding and thematizing the data looking for differences and similarities in the transcripts rather than unilaterally focusing on isolated exceptions. We tried to counter the potential interest biases as far as possible by covering all professions at Accio in the empirical material. Furthermore, we were able to complement the employees' perspectives with the manager's perspective. In addition, the former employee could add a more critical and independent perspective, since this person had left the organization and could be more critical about the organization without criticizing him- or herself for still being a part of it.

The fourth aspect of source criticism outlined above concern the credibility regarding the distance between the source and the studied event. This aspect is rather unproblematic in this thesis, since the purpose not is to study any isolated past events but rather to create an understanding of continuously socially constructed phenomenon. Thus, the continuous phenomenon is self-explored by the sources, which shortens the distance between source and the event significantly.

We have made efforts to be aware of all problematic elements in our research work in order to ensure credible interpretations, findings and analysis. However, impacts caused by our own interpretations, assumptions, pre-conceptions and pre-understandings can be hard to identify without ending up criticizing everything. To avoid empirical hypercriticism and still minimize problematic elements in research work, researchers are encouraged to work more specifically with reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldbberg,

2009). Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) argue that in order to avoid the empirical normative data shackling by doing simple sorting and categorization in mushroom-picking research, authors should focus more on interpretation and reflection. Reflective research is based on an ambiguous reality, on careful interpretations of the empirical data and on reflections of these interpretations. In other words, reflective research is a critical self-exploration of your own interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

We chose to take note of this in our research. Research constructs, rather than depicts, what is being researched (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), meaning that we as researchers create findings that are bound to ourselves and our own pre-conceptions, pre-understandings, biases and assumptions. Reflexivity stimulates coherence and thoughtfulness in the production of empirical material by emphasizing continuous integration of four levels of reflexive interpretation; empirical interaction, interpretation of the interpreting subject, critical interpretation and reflection on text production and language use (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

The most compelling example on how reflexive interpretation helped us create awareness and unlock biased gridlocks arose during the analysis of the cultural theme. With the printed transcripts in front of us we ended up in a discussion regarding the culture at Accio. We debated whether we were able to interpret and identify the culture as distinctive enough to have a significant effect on the employees' identities. One of us felt that we could clearly state so and one of us felt we could not. When we were to argue for our standpoints, it became clear that the atmosphere really could be seen as having significance on the employees' personalities (and vice versa). Furthermore, we discovered that the cultural values were in line with how many of the employees wanted to accentuate themselves in their interviews with us.

When reflecting upon how one of us could initially fail to see this, we came to discuss our meta-theoretical views on popular concepts in organizational research, such as culture, change, resistance, management, leadership and identity. The one of us who did not see the link between culture and identity realized that he or she may have unknowingly chosen not to see the link, in order not to use a concept that risked telling

us everything and nothing. Discussing social science from a postmodern point of view often results in all parties being more or less right, since the concept is socially constructed, subjective and context-dependent. The risk of agreeing to disagree may limit the search for similarities and common ground. By problematizing disagreements, making pre-understandings, pre-conceptions and expectations visible to each other and to one self, researchers can help themselves and each other to discover new knowledge (Daft, 1983). Identifying our rather subconscious protest against the everything-and-nothing-dimension, enabled us to create a deeper understanding of the link between the organizational culture at Accio and the identities of the employees.

3.6 Knowledge contribution

The four requirements we developed prior to our choice of research case were first and foremost based on our ambition to elaborate on the subject of sharing knowledge among healthcare professionals. These requirements facilitated our answer to our research question and helped us identify some research areas worth exploring further. During the process of data collection and data analysis we discovered that the knowledge at Accio was shared extensively based on some mutual understanding and normative behaviour. Normative and indirect aspects of control in general and organizational culture in particular are known to be good control mechanisms for management in knowledge-intensive firms due to complex work and autonomous workers (Alvesson, 2004). However, literature emphasizing cultural significance on knowledge sharing in particular is somewhat underdeveloped in terms of in-depth empirical studies. Our knowledge contribution from this single case study is empirical and conceptual. Our contribution will complement the existing literature empirically and conceptually, by creating new insights and notions. We achieve this by working with rich empiricism consisting of detailed interviews with intimate stories, which enables us to make a depiction of a part of an organization and create new knowledge.

4. The story about Accio

In this story we present our case and the findings we have made based on the interviews and the observations. The chapter contains four parts: (1) We commence with a general discussion about Accio and its characteristics. (2) Furthermore we present the organizational culture at Accio by using the themes which we have identified: *Good atmosphere*, *Open communication*, *Team-spirit*, and *Culture-based recruitment*. (3) After this we present our view on Accio's knowledge sharing. (4) Lastly, we link the identified organizational culture with the identified knowledge sharing at Accio.

4.1 General information about Accio

The responsibility for the Swedish public healthcare is geographically divided between twenty-one counties (and regions). Accio is organized in one of the bigger counties, associated as an university clinic and located in a municipality in between two bigger cities in the region. It was established in the 1980s in a multi-storey residential block area, as a response to the current political objective that the region's psychiatry was to be located in small organizations among ordinary people. Accio is still functioning on the same premises today and consists of twenty-five employees, including one unit manager. The following seven health care professions are represented at Accio: medical secretary, psychiatric nurse, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, socionom, psychologist and psychiatrist. Many of the employees, apart from the medical secretaries, are licensed psychotherapists as well. Psychotherapists are either specialized in the more traditional area of psychodynamic psychotherapy or in the newer and emerging area of cognitive behavioral therapy. Both orientations are represented at Accio.

The physical working environment consists of cell offices and the operation mode at Accio is based on teamwork. The employees, except the medical secretaries, are divided into two similar teams. Incoming remittances (patient cases) are primarily divided between the two teams based on the where the patients live. After the initial division, each patient case gets assigned a suitable responsible professional. This division of patient cases between the team members is made during the remittance

conference which each team is scheduled for approximately 45 minutes, four mornings a week. Apart from the remittance conferences, each team meet once a week for approximately 1 hour for a treatment conference where each employee can ask the other team members for input and ideas in patient cases, which they themselves may find complex. Other fixed meetings that include the whole organization are the workplace-conferences that are scheduled every Friday afternoon. At these conferences all patient cases are put aside and general questions regarding the organization and the work environment are common subjects to discuss. External lecturers are often invited to these conferences and employees at Accio are frequently encouraged to speak about relevant research and treatment practices during these workplace conferences.

4.2 Organizational culture at Accio

In this section we present our findings divided between the four cultural themes which we identified as significant in the interview transcripts: *Good atmosphere*, *Open communication*, *Team spirit*, and *Culture-based recruitment*.

Good atmosphere

The opening interview questions gave the respondents an opportunity to speak freely and openly about how they interpreted the general atmosphere. All of the respondents see Accio as characterized by a good and friendly atmosphere. Many describe the culture as warm, friendly, permissive and unpretentious:

“When I came here it was like walking, it was like stepping into a warm embrace. We laugh a lot.

Yes, it’s probably the best workplace I’ve been to during all these years”.

Humility, responsiveness, openness, respectfulness, professionalism and a strong cohesion are common words used by the respondents when trying to explain the atmosphere. During the interviews many pointed out that they perceive their colleagues as competent and that they all share a mutual respect for each other’s knowledge. One respondent concludes that everyone at the organization want to act professional and take responsibility, creating and facilitating for a sense of security.

During our numerous visits to the organization we were able to form our own opinions about the atmosphere. Both of us sensed a warm welcoming from all employees we met the first time we visited the organization. We were invited to join them on afternoon *fika* on several occasions during our visits. These informal meetings took place both in the staff kitchen and in the long hallway that runs all the way through the premises. By observing these gatherings as guests and participants, we were able to see that much of what the interviewees say about their atmosphere is making sense. The mood was friendly, unpretentious, and full of respect for each other and each other's expertise. The cohesion at the organization seemed evident, especially when employees asked for advice and were met with clear commitment and plenty of time to ask follow-up questions. Everyone seems willing to help each other, despite the fact that they often state and discuss how busy they are themselves. The strength to solely ask colleagues for advice and not to transfer their own responsibilities onto others was highlighted by several interviewees as appreciated common sense at Accio.

When interviewees were asked to think of what may facilitate this significant culture at Accio, several interviewees highlighted the remittance conferences as an important factor. Their formal purpose is to discuss incoming remittances but, according to the interviewees, the most important purpose is to be able to say 'good morning' to each other and to catch up:

“Without it, I think that people very quickly start to go their own ways, that you begin to work against each other.”

Each of the interviewees have previous work experience from other health care organizations and all of them claim that Accio is the best workplace they have experienced so far, due to the friendly and open culture. They highlight that a sense of fellowship and team-spirit, the atmosphere and the open communication makes Accio a great workplace.

Open communication

Most respondents claim that there are few if any group splits at Accio and that everybody talks openly to everybody. Furthermore, the majority of the participants

portray the organization as being ‘flat’ compared to other similar health care organizations. As one respondent stated:

“We regard each other as being all on the same level. “

Many participants highlight that the healthcare industry traditionally is characterized by a hierarchy with doctors at the top. However, they point out that this is not salient in this organization, nor are the other common conflicts in the psychiatric health care context such as the ones between psychotherapists specialized in psychodynamics and in cognitive behaviours, between psychiatrists and psychologists, and between psychologists and social workers:

“Here, no one is looking for polemics, we are all well educated. Most of us are licensed psychotherapists with different specializations. And it is none of us who makes any fuss about that. It's more that you try to make the best of it, like - Who can help this patient in the best way? And it's very liberating to have it like this, that there is no fuss about it. When I came here it was different.”

We were able to confirm the open communication, the unpretentious and informal atmosphere and the lack of conflicts during our participation at two formal workplace-conferences and at a couple of informal afternoon *fikas*. During the informal meetings both work-related questions and social questions were asked and answered without us managing to identify any obvious structures. However, one respondent mentioned that the traditional history of doctors being at the top of the ladder could be sensed, even though not noticeable in everyday life, as an underlying assumption. The same respondent pointed out that this hierarchy is less noticeable at this organization though, compared to other health care organizations.

All of the respondents agree that there are no obvious differing jargons or ways of talk to each other at Accio. Furthermore, the interviewees perceive that different ways of communicating and socializing are less visible at Accio compared to previous work places. However, the majority of the respondents believe that the jargon may unproblematically differ to a small extent at Accio. One respondent thinks the jargon used in the teams differ from one another depending on which doctor is working in the team. Yet another respondent believes the jargon may differ between gender and if

people perform direct treatment work or not. One respondent mention the work experience at the organization as a potential factor that can create different jargons. Overall, most respondents do not perceive any different jargons and communicative styles at all. Consequently, they feel that everyone approach each other at Accio in the same way, regardless of profession, age, experience and gender. This consistent and cohesive open communication at Accio seems to facilitate for the fellowship and team spirit that are perceived to characterize the culture at Accio.

Team spirit

A significantly large part of the employees' statements during the interviews and the observations were made in comparison and relation to earlier work places and other similar organizations. Even though comparison is a common way to define oneself, it was inevitable to note the interestingly excessive use of comparisons between Accio and 'everyone else. Many respondents emphasized the history and location of Accio as two important aspects that have resulted in a special group-thinking, team-spirit and culture. The perceived fact among the interviewees that there have been few disturbances from the outside has made Accio autonomous and less exposed to conflicting demands and changes compared to other similar organizations in nearby cities. As one respondent states:

“I think we have been allowed to develop our own style here. We get to be alone, there is no one that cares about what we do as long as we show good results and we always do that, we always have many patients and there is no one who settles in”.

One interviewee reflects on why Accio has been left alone like this and created a clear division between us and them:

“The organization has not been regarded as not as good and not as progressive, almost like second-class treatment”.

Several interviewees mention the “unique spirit” at Accio during the interviews. According to them, the unique spirit at Accio is an established and well-known matter of fact in the whole health care region. The spirit was explicitly identified several years ago by a couple of psychology students making a research project about the

organization (no reference due to the promised anonymity mentioned above). All individual explanations of the unique spirit differ between the interviewees, but the common essence in all descriptions is a coherent, permissive and safe culture. The employees feel that they are good enough as they are, that they are free and that they are not required to know everything. They sense that they are allowed to ask questions without being judged and that they help each other in their teams. Some interviewees regard this unique spirit as something that strengthens the cooperation, creates cohesion and a sense that they as an organization can do as they please.

However, some of the interviewees that emphasize this positive significance of the unique spirit also highlight that their spirit risks making them less inclined to absorb new ideas and alternatives. The coherent and significant group thinking entail a risk of isolating themselves too much from everyone else.

The portrayed view of Accio as a high performance organization which is special and somewhat better than other similar organizations could also be noted during one of the observations. During a Friday workplace-conference the manager informs that the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket) is planning an inspection at the organization. One employee asks the manager why the authority is to visit specifically Accio. The manager answers that he or she does not know and that it most likely is a 'routine case'. Immediately after the manager had answered another employee rhetorically asks if they (the authority) just chose the best organization. The employee is met with both giggles and nods.

When interviewees are asked to think of other factors that contribute to this significant team-spirit and culture at Accio, several interviewees highlight that the employees actually work at the organization. As one respondent argues:

“Where I worked previously, some worked part-time at the organization and halftime with something privately or through the University (as researcher/lecturer). Even if you do not want to change your loyalty, I still think you do it pretty quickly. So I think people have worked here and have taken care of each other like an old marriage.”

In particular, the team spirit, the fellowship and the organizational culture at Accio in general are aspects that the employees appear to take great pride in. This pride is manifested in that the employees appear to take joint responsibility in taking care and protecting this culture from different ways of working, thinking and behaving, for example in the recruitment processes of new employees.

Culture-based recruitment

Due to the remote and not very attractive geographic location of Accio, some of the participants believe that people seek to work at Accio because of certain interests and reasons. The spirit and culture at the organization is mentioned as one potential reason. Several interviewees claim that they know for a fact that people aspire to join Accio because of the known and established culture. According to some interviewees, both students looking for education practice and qualified professionals looking for job contact Accio because of its permissive, free, friendly, unpretentious and open culture. The interviewees also agree that Accio recruits people with the unique spirit and culture in mind. Accio aim at employing people with similar mental attitude that can fit into the organization. Recurrently, the organization finds candidates among the students doing education practice that are encouraged to apply for employment at Accio after graduation. In this manner, the organization is believed to be able to preserve its unique spirit and culture. This spirit and culture is regarded as making the recruitment rather autonomous, as one respondent says:

“There are people who have come here and wanted to work here, but after a month or so, they have felt that it was not what they were looking for and then they quit. So it becomes a self-regulating thing.”

Thus, the recruitment process seems to be perceived as one way to preserve the significant atmosphere, open communication and team-spirit at Accio. In the subsequent section of this story we will put organizational aside for a while and present the employees sense-making of the sharing of knowledge at Accio.

4.3 Knowledge sharing at Accio

In the following, we will present our interpretation of the knowledge sharing taking place at Accio. In this section the knowledge sharing is divided into parts: sharing

among present colleagues and sharing among new colleagues. The findings are presented in this manner in order to correspond to the empirical material where this division was highlighted.

Sharing among present colleagues

Many respondents experience that the sharing of knowledge is an ongoing process at Accio. Nearly every respondent highlight the sharing of knowledge as by simply knocking on colleagues' doors. They point out that they are encouraged to always have their doors open for colleagues in need of help and to take time to answer their questions. The respondents emphasize the importance of not hesitate to ask other colleagues for help or advice, and to be humble enough to take the time needed to answer questions from other colleagues. Thus, in order to share knowledge the colleagues ask each other for help on a daily basis. We were able to observe this openness, unpretentiousness and informality by participating at several informal afternoon *fikas* at the organization. Even during these informal breaks many patient cases, treatments and remittances were discussed. The employees continuously asked each other for advice, help and second opinions and seemed to take pride in taking their time to respond.

“The watchword here is - we help each other. When I don't have a patient or am busy on the phone, my door is always open... Then of course there is one colleague who hasn't been asking a single question during all these years, not even once”

All the respondents illustrate that the knowledge sharing at Accio is characterized by participation. They emphasize the treatment conference, taking place once a week, as a good forum to raise questions and where everyone has the chance to speak up, share opinions or highlight matters. Thus, the treatment conference creates conditions for knowledge sharing. Many respondents think that these formal meetings give them an opportunity to share their own views and to listen to what their colleagues have to say. During these conferences they can find solutions to problems together as well as support each other and ask clear-cut questions to create a deeper understanding of things. However, it requires the employees to be open and comfortable enough to open up in front of other people.

“There is a complexity in sharing during the treatment conferences because you use yourself as an instrument and when you talk about yourself it is revealing, because not only does it say a lot about the patient, but it also says a lot about yourself and that can be exhausting and sometimes embarrassing.”

Furthermore, some of the interviewees identify internal lectures as an efficient way of sharing knowledge. They explain that internal lectures take place during workplace conferences on Fridays where colleagues can choose to talk about their work in order to inform and educate the rest of the colleagues. Also, external lecturers are invited to talk about new findings or knowledge within a research area. At these conferences, students who do their education practice often participate and take part of the knowledge sharing. However, this is only one out of several ways in which the employees share their knowledge with the practicing and working students at Accio.

Sharing among new colleagues

Since Accio is a university clinic, the organization hosts students for most parts of the year. The students are both graduated candidates doing their supervised clinical training as well as first- and second-cycle students enrolled in nearly all of the programs leading to a profession represented at Accio. The students' education practice ranges from a couple of days up to six or twelve months, depending on the profession. Most common is a duration of approximately ten weeks where the student gets assigned a clinical supervisor and a suitable patient case with a distinct problem which he or she will work with individually during the practice period.

In formal terms, the employees are said to be clinical supervisors, assisting the students with their independent patient cases and training them in how to practically bring out the theoretical knowledge acquired at their educational institutions. However, the employees also put clear emphasis on mediating the aspects that can be labeled as soft, experience-related and tacit knowledge, such as identifying the values and the humble people-skills needed to work at Accio:

“I think that humanity, reception, how to understand people with problems, is important to communicate to them, more than perhaps what exactly the criteria for a depression are and so on.”

Apart from the clinical supervising, Accio has a well-developed organized system where all practicing students get personal meetings with employees from all of the professions represented at the organization. At these meetings the employees inform the students about their own specific profession and what they do at this organization in their professional role. These meetings differ, partly based on who is presenting their profession, but also based on which profession the student represents. The employees present treatment procedures and routine procedures regarding for example medicines, blood samples and drug analysis.

The manager at Accio sees the supervision as a kind of mentorship, which is immensely valuable. In general, the students are presented and informed about both theoretical and clinical knowledge as well as practical experience-related knowledge regarding all professions represented at Accio. A constraining factor in these personal meetings, identified by many interviewees, is the time-aspect. Both in the sense that the students are doing their practice period during a limited period of time, but also that the employees themselves are not given the time needed to present their profession and the psychiatric field fair and properly. The supervising aspect of the work is prioritized at Accio since it is a university clinic with educational duty. In addition, it is an aspect in which the employees take great pride in performing:

“When new and younger colleagues arrive, I think it’s really important to say - feel free to ask me, we all help each other, no matter what profession they have.”

However, all interviewed employees agree that the patient work is of highest priority, making supervising a fun and appreciated aspect of their work at the same time as it is time-consuming and challenging to make it worth-while. In addition to the personal meetings and the supervised patient case, the employees also share their knowledge with the students at the remittance conferences, the treatment conferences, the workplace conferences and during the afternoon *fika*:

“Already when we read the remittance...we inform in the meantime. As in -Then usually we do this, - It is usually the therapist who takes that, - This is that specialist's area. Every time we open our mouths, it's some sort of opportunity for learning if you are open for it.”

Common for the vast majority of the interviewees is that the supervising is regarded as an appreciated and fun aspect of the work at Accio. The employees sense that their own level of knowledge is easier to comprehend when put in relation to others with less knowledge:

“When candidates come here, I can see I have acquired a lot of knowledge. When you walk in here everyday it might not be so clear and you can feel that -Nah, I know nothing. But in meetings with these younger ones, it becomes apparent.”

Many of the employees put value in the supervising and practice periods, not only for the kind of personal benefits but also for benefit of the whole organization. Many of the interviewees take great pride in the fact that quite a few present colleagues started of as student candidates at Accio and then started working there after graduation. The interviewed employees also see the practice period as a way of attracting talented and qualified people to their organization.

We have now presented the knowledge sharing among both present and new colleagues at Accio. In the following and final section of this chapter we will link this section about knowledge sharing with the earlier culture section in 4.2.

4.4 Organizational culture and knowledge sharing

In this final section of the story we bring together the organizational culture with the knowledge sharing at Accio and begin linking these findings with existing theories and concepts. We commence by examining the cultural themes initially identified in the interview transcripts, in order to examine the importance Accio's culture may have on its knowledge sharing. During this linking of organizational culture and knowledge sharing we identify four significant connections which appear to facilitate knowledge

sharing at Accio. We conclude this final section with a summary of these significant connections and a visual figure presentation.

Good atmosphere

“In this common way of thinking lies the desire to share knowledge and methods.”

Humility, responsiveness, openness, respectfulness, professionalism and a strong cohesion are frequent descriptions used by the respondents when trying to explain what characterizes the organization, its atmosphere, culture and unique spirit. These characteristics can be regarded as a shared understanding of security, collectivism and unselfishness at Accio. “You are good enough as you are”, “you are valuable”, “you will not be judged” are expressed statements when the respondents are asked to explain how the work atmosphere make them feel. This atmosphere appears to affect the sharing of knowledge at Accio in the sense that the employees’ knowledge is expected to be accessible and shared with each other. As a result of a positive and share-friendly culture, the employees can expect to take part of (i.e. access) other colleagues’ knowledge when they find it necessary. Cabrera and Cabrera (2005) argue that an organizational culture that facilitates sharing in general will be significant for knowledge sharing behaviors, which seems to be applicable in the case at hand.

The research implies that the employees are proud of their sharing and unpretentious culture, which indicates that they are likely to identify themselves with the organizational culture. We observe that the interpreted culture affects what the group of employees accepts as the right way of thinking and feeling (Schein, 2010). The organization can be seen as a helpful context, in which employees are encouraged and influenced to share knowledge and competence, thus leading to the possibility of sharing both explicit and tacit knowledge (Harvey, 2012). The employees are encouraged to always have their doors open for colleagues in need of help and to take their time to answer questions. This **open door aspect** is mentioned by the vast majority of the interviewees and it is identified as one aspect that makes knowledge sharing an appreciated, ongoing process at Accio.

The willingness to have your door open and take the time to answer questions seems to be only half of the acknowledgement needed to fully show your compliance and

solicitude to the organization. Our interpretation is that employees that do not share their knowledge risk to be looked at in a demeaning way. Some of the respondents state that people that do not want to share knowledge is not suited to work at the organization. Not asking for help or advice would signal that you look at yourself as slightly superior in relation to your colleagues, which does not correspond with the existing culture at Accio. We observe that if an employee does not show a desire for other colleagues' knowledge, the colleagues will interpret this as a lack of humility. Furthermore, being superior to your colleagues in terms of not asking others for advice, signals that you regard yourself as being fully-trained and better than everyone else. This would contradict their current culture since many respondents highlight the importance of being humble for your ignorance and not appear as if you are omniscient.

“The watchword here is - we help each other. When I don't have a patient or am busy on the phone, my door is always open... Then of course there is one colleague who hasn't been asking a single question during all these years, not even once.”

In this statement, the colleague that has never asked a single question appears to not behave in the desired dependent way. The ability to consistently make independent decisions that affects numerous lives, based solely on your own judgment, may in some contexts and cultures be regarded as something positive and desirable. However, in this situation it appears as if the opposite is desirable and worth striving for. Showing that you are dependent on your colleagues seems to be the normative way of behaving in order to gain acceptance from your colleagues. This **dependency aspect** appears to facilitate reciprocal and continuous knowledge sharing at Accio.

The employees recognize the importance and the benefits of obtained knowledge, which is essential for sharing knowledge and competence (Riege, 2005). However, it seems as if you cannot expect to get help from your colleagues if you do not act in accordance with the organizational culture. With reference to the statement above, the employee was not judged based on the questions actually asked but rather on the questions *not* being asked.

The willingness to share your own knowledge becomes a form of acknowledgement or confirmation that you cherish and identify yourself with the existing culture at Accio. The culture urges employees to continuously share their own knowledge, which has

established a context in which the employees are encouraged to social interaction with each other. Thus, the culture seems to support and facilitate knowledge sharing (De Long, 2007). However, the relationship between the organizational culture and the knowledge sharing appears to be a **mutual impact**. The culture seems to facilitate continuous and autonomous sharing simultaneously as the continuous sharing appears to serve as a tool to maintain and reinforce the actual culture. Whenever a question is asked and responded to in a comprehensive and committed manner, it can be regarded as a confirmation and reinforcement of the mantra that it is accepted to not know everything, that no one is to be judged for not knowing and that it is the collective effort that matters.

However, the facilitating effects of the organizational culture on the sharing of knowledge appear to have a cost. The culture requires the employees to be comfortable enough to open up in front of other people. The vast majority of the interviewees do not regard this 'cost' as a sacrifice at all. Instead, they sense that the organizational culture is aligned with their own self-identities and uncritically act in accordance with what is expected of them (Alvesson, 2004; Schein, 2010):

“As a person, I am so confident in myself so I dare to ask. I dare to be stupid. I mean, it's better to ask one time too many than one too few. I'm very inquisitive. Here, I feel that it is perfectly okay.”

Acting in ways that confirm the expected and wanted behaviours given by the organizational culture makes the respondents feel that they are staying authentic and true to themselves and their self-identity. Accordingly, **forming identities** seem to be an aspect which ensures continuous sharing of knowledge at Accio. However, some interviewees highlight the inconvenient price one has to pay in order to stay true to the friendly cohesion at the organization:

“There is a complexity in sharing during the treatment conferences because you use yourself as an instrument and when you talk about yourself it is revealing, because not only does it say a lot about the patient, but it also says a lot about yourself and that can be exhausting and sometimes embarrassing.”

As stated above, the formal purpose of the remittance conferences and the treatment conferences is to discuss incoming and current patient cases. Thus, it is an explicit object to share know-how and experiences at these meetings. However, these

meetings are also perceived to encourage knowledge sharing indirectly, through socialization. As one respondent reasoned when talking about the conferences:

“The most important thing is that you meet each other, that you say good morning to each other and catch up a little. That was not the situation when I worked in [organization name left out due to anonymity]. Without that, I think that people very quickly start to go their own ways, that you begin to work against each other.”

The use of formal meetings for informal and social exchanges can create and strengthen the sense of loyalty and cohesion at Accio. The meetings function as an important part of the organizational structure that upholds and facilitates sharing of knowledge (Riege, 2005). Moreover, the perceived common sense regarding asking colleagues for advice without transferring responsibilities to them may increase the propensity and willingness of employees to answer questions and to share knowledge. On the contrary, if asking for help would lead to shirking responsibility, this could have implicated an unwillingness to answer any questions. In that case, the sharing of knowledge could potentially be less extensive than it is today.

Open communication

According to some respondents, it is easier to share knowledge at this healthcare organization compared to previous ones they have worked at. As one respondent argues:

“I find it easy to share knowledge and expertise here and I think that it is easier here than in many other places. I think of my former organization which previously had conflicts, especially between doctors and psychologists. And then it was not always so easy to share the knowledge you have.”

Accio’s open communication and lack of conflicts is seemed to be partly originated from the organizational culture and the organizational structure. Some respondents explain that it is in everyone’s best interest to perceive each other as equals and avoid highlighting themselves as superior:

“We regard each other to be on the same level. “

The humility and the respect for each other are thought to be two reasons why Accio is characterized by openness and fewer conflicts compared to other health care organizations. The fact that all employees see themselves and their colleagues as knowledge workers can be shown as a breeding ground for this respect. The high level of education among the interviewees implies that it is a mature group of people in terms of high degrees of knowledge. Also, it legitimizes their status of expertise (Alvesson, 2004), which we believe is an important aspect for their self-esteem and self-perception:

“No one is here looking for polemics, we are all well-educated. Most of us are licensed psychotherapists with different specializations. And it is none of us who makes any fuss about that. It's more that you try to make the best of it, like - who can help this patient in the best way?”

The employees paint a very nice picture of Accio as an exceptional place to work at, where everyone seems to get along with few conflicts in relation to other similar workplaces. However, conflicts do occur in every organization and Accio is no exception. The employees explain that when conflicts arise, the respectful and pragmatic climate at Accio is pivotal for constructive communication and compromises. The culture is said to have a decisive impact on how the employees handle these situations since they interpret the culture as open and friendly, which increases the chances of solving discussions with good communication. As a result of this behavior, the employees tend to focus on the positive sides of collaborating with each other. This positive attitude enables them to share knowledge in order to create synergies instead of being afraid of potential gridlocks and conflicts:

“It has never seemed like there have been any contradictions, however. Quite the contrary, it has been interesting to see things from different perspectives.”

The person giving this statement appears to refer to potential conflicts as beneficial for Accio, since it can highlight different perspectives and thus create a better understanding of a problem. Solving a conflict together is a potential manner of sharing knowledge, since the employees share their perspectives with each other.

Team spirit

The respect, maturity and care that characterize the way employees treat each other may be derived from the history of Accio and it is said to be almost “ingrained in the walls”. Furthermore, many interviewees claim that even though the conflict-free culture stems from earlier generations, it is managed, protected and taken care of by the current employees. The employees show awareness of their own personal, important part in the coherent organizational culture, as if they have a valuable history to preserve for future generations. It appears as if the employees believe they have an impact on the organizational culture which makes them feel important and proud of working at Accio (Alvesson, 2004).

Culture-based recruitment

In terms of hiring new employees, the organizational culture seems to have a significance on the sharing of knowledge. The interviewees express that they feel a responsibility to engage in the recruitment of new colleagues. In their view, it is a matter of course to share knowledge in an appealing way to students during their education practice, in order to motivate talented candidates to apply for work at Accio in the future.

Formally, the employees share their theoretical and practical knowledge as supervisors for the students. Many of the employees point out that they talk about the collaborative culture and how it affects them in their daily work. Subsequently, the practicing students are informed of the culture, the values that characterizes Accio and the humble people-skills needed to work there:

“When new and younger colleagues arrive, I think it’s really important to say - feel free to ask me, we all help each other, no matter what profession they have.”

This can be seen as a form of sharing, since employees want to transfer important components of the culture to new and potential generations of group members (Hofstede et al, 1990; Schein, 2010). However, the interviewees express a significant faith in that the students’ educational institutions provide them with the theoretical and technical knowledge required to carry out their work. Instead, the employees focus more on sharing the soft, practical and experience-related knowledge which is desirable for present and new colleagues within the organization:

“It is important for new people to learn the culture, not to believe that you are fully trained, but that you can ask if you have any questions. You cannot show that you know everything here. You have to accept that you are not fully learned, instead show that you want to learn.”

The interviewed employees believe that by sharing the current culture and the preferred soft, practical and experience-related knowledge needed, they are able to identify students that embrace and appreciate the organizational culture. Furthermore, the employees can motivate these identified students to apply for employment at Accio. People learn through socialization (Hofstede et al., 1990) and if students learn to appreciate certain knowledge and values from the current employees, this is likely to affect the organizational culture if they choose to apply for a job at Accio in the future. This preparatory part of the recruitment process is believed to generate job applicants that already appreciate the current share-friendly culture at Accio. Thus, oftentimes new recruits are well aware of what they are getting themselves into. As one interviewee explained:

“We have had some doctor candidates who have been very much stereotypical doctors, not so keen to cooperate or having such a dialogue that we have here. And they've quit naturally when their practice has ended, but we would probably not have chosen to let them start here, and they have not tried to come here so I do think they had known that they wouldn't fit here.”

The participation of the employees in the recruitment process may possibly affect the organizational culture, since they try to transfer components of the culture to new generations of employees (Hofstede et al., 1990; Schein, 2010). As a result of the participatory recruitment of new employees at Accio, homogeneous groups of people with same values are created which reinforces the organizational identity and culture (Alvesson, 2004). Consequently, **homogeneous recruitment** seems to facilitate and ensure continuous knowledge sharing in the future by attracting people that appreciates a share-friendly culture.

Four identified connections and a mutual impact

During our attempts to discover connections between the organizational culture and the knowledge sharing at Accio, four significant aspects were identified as well as the finding that the relation between the organizational culture and the knowledge sharing

is of mutual impact: *Open doors*, *Dependency*, *Forming identities*, *Homogenous recruitment* and *Mutual impact*. These five concepts were marked bold in this previous section: The first four concepts are aspects of Accio’s organizational culture that we found to impact the knowledge sharing. The atmosphere of open doors and dependency seem to be conventional parts of the culture that facilitate continuous sharing of knowledge. The share-friendly culture at Accio is further ensured by forming the identities of the present employees, as well as attracting new employees who appreciates the share-friendliness. Moreover, we identified that knowledge sharing is an ongoing and continuous activity at Accio. Knowledge sharing seems to serve as a tool in Accio’s efforts to maintain and reinforce the current culture. To share knowledge seems to be the way employees manifest their acknowledgement and recognition of the culture of open doors and dependence on each other. Knowledge sharing from this mutuality perspective can be seen as culture being converted into practice. These findings are visually summarized in this figure below, named ‘The 4Connection Model’.

The 4Connection model



4.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter we have presented our findings based on our empirical material. In the beginning of this story about Accio we stayed close to the empirical material. We presented the knowledge sharing among present and new colleagues separately, which to a great extent was similar to the presentations of the interviewees. In addition, we presented the organizational culture by using the cultural themes which we identified

early in the process of coding the interview transcripts. Later on in the story, we applied the organizational culture to the knowledge sharing and examined the relationship between the two. In this part, we started comparing our identified findings with relevant, scientific literature. Lastly, we concluded the story about Accio by presenting four significant connections as we brought together the organizational culture with Accio's knowledge sharing. In this final section, we clarified the result of our findings by a visual figure demonstrating the four identified connections between the culture and the knowledge sharing, as well as the mutual impact between these two.

5. Discussion

In the empirical chapter above, we presented our findings and an analytical reasoning on what significance Accio's organizational culture may have on the knowledge sharing within the organization. We identified four aspects of the organizational culture which seem to have a positive impact on the knowledge sharing: open doors, dependency, forming identities and homogeneous recruitment. In this chapter, we will begin by further examine and discuss the four identified aspects and the positive significance these aspects seem to have on Accio's knowledge sharing. Furthermore, we also discuss the mutual impact that seems to characterize the connection between the organizational culture and the knowledge sharing at Accio. In the second part of this chapter we examine the four identified aspects and the culture in general from a more critical perspective by questioning whether Accio's significant culture simply facilitates knowledge sharing or if it also risks complicating it.

5.1 Positive significance

In this section we discuss our findings. We put an emphasis on examining the identified four connections. Accio has an organizational culture that seems to be significant for the way the employees share knowledge. The organizational culture calls for open doors, dependency, forming identities and homogeneous recruitment. Furthermore, we discuss the mutual impact between Accio's organizational culture and knowledge sharing, thus analysing the significance of the organizational culture.

Open doors and willingness to ask and answer

Based on our findings, we acknowledge that Accio has a certain and quite unique organizational culture that seems to have a significance on the employees' sharing of professional knowledge in particular and of knowledge in general. The positive and open culture may result in employees trying to align themselves with the culture in order to be regarded as open and positive themselves. The employees at Accio highlighted that having open doors and being accessible to your colleagues is the core of the organizational culture. The continuous mentioning about having open doors became almost like a mantra throughout the interviews, and it seemed as if the

employees were proud of this feature in their daily work life. The employees take pride in Accio being a relatively 'flat organization' and not as traditional and hierarchical compared to other similar organizations.

It may be relevant to question if having open doors is a result of a relatively flat organizational culture, or if it has been created by the people working at Accio. However, while a possible outcome of having open doors is an increased willingness to share knowledge, it requires the employees to be confident enough to be able to open up and share knowledge. At Accio, employees meet their patients in what should be regarded as a confidential and secure context, where patients share information about themselves that can be difficult to share. The way the employees handle their meetings with their patients can also be quite indicative about themselves as persons, since they work with themselves as instruments. Also, to share knowledge means sometimes to share a bit of themselves. This results in a demand on the individual to be secure and confident in the group in order to share their knowledge.

The organizational culture prevents conflicts, since it affects the way employees communicate with each other. Accio has a system of routinized knowledge sharing through scheduled and formal meetings where the employees are expected to listen, ask and share knowledge with each other. These forums for knowledge sharing could be viewed as something that upholds the culture and encourages a continuous knowledge sharing. However, these formal meetings may also be a result of the culture that calls for people to sit down together and share their experiences and wisdom and thus it goes both ways.

Dependency rather than interdependency

The second aspect of Accio's culture and the second connection in the 4Connection model concerns how the organizational culture encourages dependency. Accordingly, with Schein's (2010) assumption that an organization's culture shows what is accepted by the group to be right and wrong, the ward clearly emphasizes cooperation. In many organizations, being interdependent means that you are confident and self-knowledgeable, but at the ward that sort of behaviour is seen as superior in a quite demeaning way. The culture at the ward calls for the employees to be dependent on

each other instead of acting independent in their daily work life. In the case of Accio, a conclusion that may be drawn is that dependency is right while interdependency is wrong. The employees at Accio talked about their culture as something that strengthens the cooperation and creates a strong cohesion at Accio.

The majority of the employees appear to take great pride in embodying, taking care of and protecting the values that are thought to characterize Accio. They do this by voluntarily taking responsibility to protect the organization from organizational, administrative and behavioural aspects that depart from their current way of doing things. This may illustrate that a community has been created at Accio. This desire to take care of and protect the organization by trying to isolate itself from changes and dissidents is not fully shared by the manager. The manager talked duplicitously about losing valuable knowledge when people leave the organization, often due to retirement. Experienced employees are perceived as valuable. At the same time, all old knowledge is not necessarily viewed as good. The perceived opposition to dissidents does not fully correspond to how employees talk about themselves and their culture as being pragmatic and characterized by respect for new and different inputs.

Forming identities

The third aspect of Accio's culture that seems to have an importance on the knowledge sharing at the organization is the employees identification with the organization and what the organization stands for. The employees at Accio seem to be proud of working there and they emphasize the organizational culture as unique. Their identities seem to be shaped by the existing organizational culture and they talk about how they, as individuals, fit into the organization. This can be sensed throughout the interviews and indicates that they identify themselves with the qualities Accio expects of its employees.

Organizations often aim to build strong cultures in order to develop and retain their skilled employees (Pfeffer, 1994) and that can be found at Accio, as the participants shared their belief that it is the organizational culture that makes people stay within the organization. The employees at Accio regard themselves as friendly, easy-going and positive people that like to collaborate with their colleagues. While that might be a

relatively general and universal claim, the employees try to communicate and emphasize the importance of this self-identity at the ward. This conforms to Alvesson's (2004) reasoning about an organizational identity that is reinforced when the organizational members identify themselves with the organizational identity. This seems to be applicable in the case of Accio, and it is noticeable throughout the interviews when the employees talk about what is seen as accepted behaviour at Accio and what is not. A share-friendly behaviour is encouraged and the employees seem to identify themselves with sharing knowledge through direct communication, for example in corridors and at meetings. The employees appear to conform their identities aligned to the organizational culture and share knowledge extensively at work. This is beneficial for Accio, since the ability to constantly share knowledge is said to be the core activity of an organization that wants to create new knowledge (Starkey, 1996).

We believe that a community has been created at Accio, since the employees express that they trust their colleagues and have developed shared beliefs when working together (Alvesson, 2004). Even though they might not be aware of it, many of the respondents independently pointed out the same qualities when trying to explain what is required in order to fit into the culture. They highlighted the importance of being open towards others, speak up when needed and share knowledge to benefit colleagues in particular and Accio in general. This positive attitude towards communicating knowledge evidently indicates a knowledge sharing behaviour. There seems to be a bottom-up agreement on how to share knowledge with each other in order to accomplish a shared goal. The employees emphasize the relationships and networking they nurture on a daily basis. Additionally, they point out a strong feeling of team spirit at Accio, where the employees feel a belongingness and strong cohesion. These are clear signs of an existing community (Alvesson, 2004; Swan et al., 1999) that seems to constitute an important part of the daily work life of the employees and thus affect their way of communicating and share knowledge with each other.

What struck us as interesting and remarkable was that while all of the employees identify themselves with the organizational culture, they do not identify themselves with the bigger health care region that Accio is a part of. Instead, they highlighted that they appreciated that Accio almost took a stand against it and where independent in the decision-making when possible. This can be aligned with Schein's (2010) theory about

subcultures. Thus, the culture at Accio can be regarded as a subculture in relation to the bigger health care organization. Moreover, this may be regarded as a feature mentioned by Ashforth and Mael (1989) arguing that individuals can identify with an organization without fully embracing all of the values or systems that it implies.

Homogenous recruitment leading to homogeneous people

The fourth and last identified cultural aspect presented in the 4Connection model concerns the significance that the recruitment processes appears to have on current knowledge sharing at Accio. Alvesson (2004) points out that recruitment of employees with similar education and characteristics leads to homogenous groups of people with the similar values in an organization. Furthermore, if they identify themselves with the organizational identity, the organizational identity will be reinforced. In our case, employees take part of the recruitment process and search for people they believe would fit into the existing culture. Thus, they are attracted to potential colleagues who share the same values as them. We believe that this can be an indicator of an unconsciously process that goes on in the minds of the employees at Accio. In a homogeneous group, employees might perceive knowledge sharing to be easier, since they are likely to cooperate better with people they have a lot in common with. We believe that a homogenous group with a share-friendly culture creates incentives for the group members to share existing knowledge with each other. Accio seems to be a slow-moving organization in general, which possibly may be a result of a homogenous group of people. This recruitment process can be seen as a practical example of Alvesson's (2004) theory, since Accio tries to align employees' self-images by talking of expected characteristics and behaviours that the ward holds.

Mutual impact

In addition to the four cultural aspects that connect the organizational culture with the knowledge sharing at Accio, we also present an identified reciprocal connection. The organizational culture and knowledge sharing goes hand in hand and to have a mutual impact on each other. The organizational culture at Accio appears to contribute to a feeling of participation, pride, increased self-esteem and increased work ethic. These factors are likely to affect the attitude towards knowledge sharing and the way

employees communicate knowledge with each other. Consequently, the culture can be seen as framing the employees' beliefs of knowledge and knowledge sharing (De Long, 1997). Simultaneously, the manner in which people share knowledge at Accio appears to have a significant effect on the organizational culture. The employees at Accio are highly encouraged to share their know-how and their experiences. When they conduct this knowledge sharing they seem to acknowledge and reinforce the organizational culture and everything it symbolizes for them in terms of openness, respect, collectiveness and such. These characteristics seem to be important for their community and unite them (Wenger, 1998). Their own sharing becomes a verification of the cultural characteristics at Accio, which is cherished among the employees themselves.

5.2 Risks

Hitherto, we have presented four significant cultural aspects that appear to have a facilitating on knowledge sharing at Accio. However, there are two sides to every story. In the following, we further examine our findings deeper from a critical stance in order to examine potential drawbacks with Accio's culture and knowledge sharing. We share Pfeffer's (1994) point of view that employees and their skills affect the success or failure of an organization. This becomes especially relevant in an organization characterized by a high degree of knowledge, according to Alvesson's (2004) definition of a knowledge-intensive firm. The studied organization corresponds with this definition. Subsequently, it calls for a normative and indirect management of the employees. Pfeffer (1994) argues that organizations often attempt to build strong cultures in order to develop and retain skilled employees. This can be viewed in Accio's special and rather unique culture that unites the employees as well as encourages them to share their knowledge. In our view, Accio's organizational culture can be viewed as a way for the management to control their highly autonomous employees indirectly. This will succeed only if the employees identify themselves with the organizational culture, which seems to be the case in our study.

The strong organizational culture at Accio seems to generate several positive outcomes. The organizational culture appears to contribute in creating strong identities among the employees, making the employees more motivational in their job, foster learning and encourage knowledge sharing. We believe that the organizational culture can create

desirable conditions for productive knowledge sharing. However, this theoretically optimal way of controlling autonomous employees does not come without drawbacks. A strong organizational culture may have negative effects as well. Accio's distinct culture and four significant cultural aspects might risk to result in conformism, fragmentation, less learning, group thinking and vulnerability.

Conformism

A strong organizational culture may lead to conformism, in the sense that people act accordingly to what is expected of them by others (Alvesson, 2004). According to our 4Connection model, the organizational culture at Accio calls for *forming identities*, but it seems as if the employees are required to conform themselves to what is expected of them. At Accio, there is a clear, yet perhaps sometimes implicit understanding of what is right and what is wrong. An individual that does not want to be open, willing to ask questions, share and speak up when needed at meetings, would probably not go along well with the culture. If an individual does not conform to the organizational identity at the ward, the other colleagues will probably be prone to foreclose that person and the possible ideas and initiatives he or she brings. Thus, new knowledge that could be generated by new persons entering the organization is not likely to be shared if these people do not conform their identities with the identity of Accio.

This culture of dependency, rather than independency, could result in less positive outcomes. A strong culture that unites people may make the group less inclined to accept new people and new habits. This may imply that the strong culture risks making the employees at Accio somewhat alien for dissidents and resistant to new knowledge, ideas and change. While it might be easier for the employees to cooperate with people that they have a lot in common with, it might restrict them from evolving and developing, compared to if the group would be more diverse. We believe that a homogenous group with a share-friendly culture creates incentives for the group members to share existing knowledge with each other. However, the knowledge being shared will presumably not be new, since a homogenous group tends to find it hard to acquire and retain new knowledge, new inputs and new ideas that go against their traditional way of doing things together (Alvesson, 2004). Accio seems to be a slow-moving organization in general, which perhaps could be a result of a too homogenous

group. We notice a risk in trying to attract a certain type of individuals instead of being open-minded and recognizing the potential synergies or outcomes which hiring different kinds of people may bring

Fragmentation as a result of a strong subculture

There is a strong subculture at Accio, since the employees tend to identify themselves with Accio but not with the bigger health care organization in general. This subculture can enhance and support the team spirit the employees feel at Accio. However, it can also make Accio fragmented and more distant from the bigger organization it belongs to. Thus, the strong organizational culture may create a broader fragmentation. The employees at Accio are proud, and express a relief of not having to cope with all of the changes the bigger health care organization wants to implement. The employees underline that because of their great results, they are almost untouchable and should feel free to prioritize as they please. This attitude could lead to a fragmentation, where Accio isolates itself from other organizations even though it could be beneficial for them to cooperate and get help from them.

Less problematizing leading to less learning

We conceive that the culture at Accio is significant for the knowledge sharing. Moreover, we believe that the knowledge sharing affects and reinforces the existing culture. Our interpretation is that the employees view knowledge sharing as their culture put into practice. Thus, they reinforce their culture by doing what they think is expected of them, which in our case is the sharing of knowledge. The employees were unanimous and found it necessary to attempt to retain the knowledge in the organization, for example by a homogeneous recruitment. However, the manager adopted another perspective and pointed out that it is not always a good thing to merely keep and reuse all of the existing knowledge. According to the manager, it is important to create conditions for necessary changes and to avoid resistance to new ideas and knowledge. The employees' attempt to protect their share-friendly culture at the ward is highlighted by the manager as one key factor that risks making the ward unable to embrace and share new knowledge, which might prevent them from learning new things.

Accio's homogeneous recruitment seems to result in a homogeneous group of people which in turn risks leading to group thinking where the drive for consensus suppresses dissent (Janis, 1972). The employees take great pride in agreeing on having open doors and to show dependency towards each other. However, an organization like Accio, as in a contemporary knowledge intensive firm characterized by a high degree of professional knowledge, could be seen as being dynamic, interested in acquiring new knowledge and in identifying, learning and possibly adapting to continuous changes in the surrounding environment. The protection of the current culture and efforts to maintain status quo, for example by homogeneous recruitment and conforming identities, might actually risk leading to the opposite. The employees run a risk of becoming victims of group thinking and members of an organization that is excellent at sharing existing knowledge but is struggling to acquire, learn and share new knowledge.

While we believe that the two different perspectives do not necessarily contradict each other, it is important to note that the focus on sharing existing knowledge may come with a price. A prioritization of one thing unavoidable leads to de-prioritization of another. Thus, an overemphasis on knowledge sharing might consume time that could be spent on gaining new knowledge. Due to less problematizing and less questioning, the organizational learning may decrease as a consequence of people taking certain facts and knowledge for granted. This would oppose the theories about organizational learning through social participation and people's interactions with each other (Wenger, 1998).

Cultural vulnerability

Both Hofstede et al. (1990) and Schein (2010) highlight the fact that organizational culture is hard to change. While that might be true, we wish to add that culture consists of people that interact with each other, and that the culture constantly evolves with them. Thus, if people change so would the culture. However, this vulnerability is not very highlighted in the literature. This vulnerability may be one of the contributing factors why Accio chooses to put so much emphasis on the homogeneous recruitment. As the employees stated in the interviews, they are aware of their own individual impact on the culture. Without a homogenous recruitment, they fear that their history might be

forgotten. The employees recognize themselves as important in the community that has been created at Accio, which is decisive for the manner in which they communicate and share knowledge. Accordingly, this cultural and collective way of doing things may be transferred to new members of the community in the future, which means that the culture and knowledge sharing is allowed to evolve and grow further.

Homogeneous recruitment, conforming identities and group thinking seems to be aspects at Accio that respond to this cultural vulnerability. Obviously, the culture is hard to change when it consists of people that are unwilling to change it. At Accio, the result of such a strong culture seems to be that successful, continuous knowledge sharing is preserved. However, aspects which we identified as facilitating this internal knowledge sharing at Accio may also be seen as potential causes to an inability for knowledge exchange with its external surroundings, such as similar health care organizations in the same region as Accio. Is it possible to oppose cultural vulnerability by having a strong culture in terms of homogeneous recruitment, open doors, dependency, forming identities and continuous knowledge sharing? This hypothesis appears to be confirmed in this case study. However, this study also indicates that this opposition risk leading to conformism, fragmentation, less learning, group thinking and resistance to dissidents, change and new knowledge. As stated in the beginning, there are always two sides to every story, and Accio is no exception.

5.3 Chapter Summary

We have identified four connections that illustrate what significance organizational culture may have on knowledge sharing at Accio: open doors, dependency, forming identities and homogeneous recruitment. In the first part of this chapter, we highlighted and discussed these four aspects. A community seems to have been created at Accio, where the employees are aware of their own impact on the organizational culture. The significance of the organizational culture on knowledge sharing appears to be mutual, where the culture seems to be significant for the knowledge sharing and vice versa. In the second questioning section, we drew attention to the risks with having such a strong and significant culture as Accio seems to have. An organizational culture like Accio's may risk to lead to fragmentation as a result of a strong subculture, to conformism and group thinking and to less learning.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Our research purpose and research question

In this thesis we have examined what significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing. We examined this by conducting interviews and observations at Accio, a public psychiatric outpatient organization in Sweden. We started in the interpretive paradigm and conducted this research based on qualitative methods in order to answer our research question:

- What significance can organizational culture play for knowledge sharing in organizations?

6.2 Our conclusion

The research on knowledge management and knowledge sharing has a long-standing focus on improving knowledge sharing through IT solutions and IT systems. The softer parts of knowledge management still seem somewhat underdeveloped in terms of in-depth empirical studies. Since people can be seen as creating new knowledge and sharing their interpretations of knowledge with each other (Swan et al., 1999), we found it important to focus on these softer parts of knowledge management. Our findings suggest that organizational culture can both facilitate and complicate employees' sharing of knowledge. Sharing can be promoted by having a culture that requires the following of employees:

- Have their doors open and be ready and willing to continuously ask and answer questions;
- Be dependent on each other rather than acting independently;
- Have self-identities that conform with the existing share-friendly culture; and
- Do preparatory homogenous recruitment work by looking for candidates that appraises a share-friendly culture.

However, an organizational culture that calls on employees to act accordingly may also complicate the sharing of knowledge. Employees that identify and protect an existing

share-friendly culture may lead to conformism, fragmentation as a result of a strong subculture, group thinking, isolation from dissidents, less problematizing leading to less learning, and a resistance to change and new knowledge. Upholding and preserving an existing share-friendly culture seems to facilitate continuous sharing of existing knowledge in an organization, simultaneously as it potentially complicates the learning, acquiring and sharing of new ditto.

In addition, we also found that the relation between organizational culture and knowledge sharing is not only a one way impact. It is not only culture that is connected to knowledge sharing, but knowledge sharing also seems to be significant for the culture. The organizational culture at the studied organization facilitates for a continuous sharing at the same time as knowledge sharing can be perceived as a way to reinforce and acknowledge the culture. In other words, sharing of knowledge at Accio can be seen as culture put into practice.

6.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

We contribute to the literature regarding organizational culture and its significance on knowledge sharing by complementing existing research empirically and conceptually. In the introductory chapter, we stated that our aim was not to present any best practices regarding how to manage organizational culture in order to facilitate effective sharing of knowledge. Instead of basing this thesis on a functionalistic perspective, we chose the interpretative paradigm. By working with a single case and with rich empiricism consisting of detailed interviews with intimate stories, we were able to make a depiction of a part of Accio and create some new knowledge. This knowledge consists of insights, concepts and notions which we identified when working with this thesis. Part of this knowledge contribution is presented visually in our 4Connection model. The concepts presented in this model help to illustrate what significance organizational culture can play on knowledge sharing in a rather facilitating way.

In developing this understanding we problematized our findings and analysis and presented potentially undesirable effects with having the kind of share-friendly culture that is significant at Accio. But so what? Why is this an interesting contribution to existing literature? It is legitimate to question what this understanding is good for. It is

our aspiration that these insights can help researchers and organizations characterized by knowledge intensiveness to acknowledge not only the potential benefits but also the risks of having a significant share-friendly culture. The difficulties of managing autonomous workers with ambiguous work tasks through direct control are well studied and identified. Today, the solution is often said to be indirect normative control, as in managing through culture. By studying what significance organizational culture can have on knowledge sharing, we have shown that this solution can have its drawbacks and lead to undesirable effects and difficulties.

6.4 Limitations

Despite the theoretical and practical implications noted above, we have also recognized some limitations worth highlighting. Our methodological choice to study a single organization in depth by conducting a case study have naturally limited our sense-making of cultural significance on knowledge sharing in general. Thus, the possibility to draw any general conclusions outside our studied context is limited. However, by choosing one particular case we were able to study an organization in depth and to increase the quality of our research.

We note that our sample of interviewees appeared to be people with rather homogeneous opinions, values and identities. We chose to cease the given possibility to contrast the perspectives of the employees by adding observations together with the perspectives of the manager and of a former employee in the empirical material. However, we believe it would have been interesting and rewarding to have interviewed several former employees, since they may feel less loyal to the organization and its employees. They could have provided us with valuable additional, contrasting perspectives that would have facilitated a broader understanding of the significance organizational culture seem to have on knowledge sharing.

6.5 Suggestions for further research

The existing literature regarding cultural significance on sharing of knowledge is still somewhat underdeveloped in terms of in-depth empirical studies. We hope to have contributed by empirically and conceptually complementing the research on this area.

We encourage researchers to further study what significance culture can play on knowledge sharing. In our view, it would be interesting to examine organizational culture further, possibly the most popular control mechanism in contemporary research regarding knowledge management and knowledge intensive firms. Furthermore, we consider it to be rewarding to further acknowledge not only the potential benefits but also the risks with having a significant share-friendly culture. That being said, we now hand over the baton to the next researchers in line who is interested in examining this interesting topic further.

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Appendix

Appendix 1.

**Frågeformulär
Bakgrund**

Ålder?

Vad har du för akademisk bakgrund?

Vad har du för yrkesroll idag?

Vad fick dig att välja den här yrkeskarriären?

Hur många år har du jobbat inom sjukvården?

När började du jobba på just den här mottagningen?

Stämning på arbetsplatsen

- Hur upplever du stämningen mellan kollegorna på jobbet? (ex bemötandet, samarbetet, kommunikationen - vänskaplig, professionell etc)

- Upplever du att jargongen skiljer sig åt mellan olika grupper? (ex äldre/yngre, erfarna/oerfarna, olika yrkesroller). Hur?

Yrkeskunskap och -kompetens

- Vad betyder yrkeskunskap och -kompetens för dig? Skiljer dem sig åt?

- Hur blir du bättre/utvecklas på ditt jobb?

- Har du upparbetat en högre yrkeskunskaps- och kompetensnivå sedan du började jobba? (Har du blivit bättre på ditt jobb?)

- Vad har du utvecklat och blivit bättre på?

- Hur pass väl känner du att du kan sätta ord på den yrkeskunskap och -kompetens som du har utvecklat med tiden? (Skiljer detta sig mellan olika arbetsområden /-uppgifter?)

Yrkeskunskaps-/kompetensdelning

- Hur fungerar det när någon på arbetsplatsen vill dela med sig av yrkeskunskap/-kompetens?

- Hur lätt eller svårt upplever du att det är att dela med sig av yrkeskunskap/-kompetens på mottagningen? Upplever du någon/några svårigheter/utmaningar med att dela dig av dina yrkeskunskaper och din yrkeskompetens idag?

- Upplever du det som lättare eller svårare att dela med dig av det du har lärt dig genom dina fort-/vidareutbildningar jämfört med dina praktiska yrkeserfarenheter?

- Skulle yngre/mer oerfarna kollegor i din yrkesgrupp kunna dra nytta av dina yrkeskunskaper och din yrkeskompetens? Om ja: Hur? Ges de möjligheten till detta idag?

- Hur specifik skulle du säga att din yrkeskunskap och yrkeskompetens är till just din yrkesgrupp?

- Skulle yngre/mer oerfarna kollegor i andra yrkesgrupper än din egen kunna dra nytta av dina yrkeskunskaper och din yrkeskompetens? Om ja: Hur? Ges de möjligheten till detta idag?

- Tror du att du skulle kunna dela med dig av din yrkeskunskap och yrkeskompetens till dina yngre/mer oerfarna kollegor på ett bättre sätt om du fick möjlighet/resurser? Om ja: Hur?

- Efter att ha resonerat över dessa frågor, är det något som du vill tillägga?

Appendix 2.

Interview questionnaire

Background

Age?

What is your academic background?

What is your professional/work title today?

What made you choose this career?

How many years have you worked in the health care area?

When did you begin working at this organization?

Atmosphere at Accio

- How do you perceive the atmosphere between the colleagues at work? (e.g. the approach, collaboration, communication – friendly, professional etc)

- Do you feel that the jargon differ between different groups? (e.g. older/younger, experienced/unexperienced, different professions, gender) How?

Professional Knowledge and Competence

- What does knowledge and competence coupled to work mean to you? Do they differ? How?

- How do you develop/get better at what you work with?

- Have you accrued a higher level of knowledge and/or competence since you started working?

- What have you developed and become better at?

- How well do you feel that you can put words on the work-coupled knowledge and competence that you have developed over time? (Does it differ between work areas/ -tasks?)

Sharing of Professional Knowledge and Competence

- How does it work when someone at the organization wishes to share some of his or hers professional knowledge and/or competence?
- How easy or difficult do you feel it is to share professional knowledge and/or competence at the organization? Do you experience any difficulties/challenges by sharing this today?
- Do you find that it is easier or more difficult to share what you have learned in your continuing / further education compared to sharing your practical experiences?
- Could younger/less experienced colleagues in your profession benefit from your professional knowledge and competence? If yes, then how? Are they given this possibility today?
- How specific would you say that your professional knowledge and competence are to your particular professional group?
- Could younger / less experienced colleagues in other professions than your own benefit from your professional knowledge and competence? If yes, then how? Are they given this possibility today?
- Do you think you could share your professional knowledge and competence to your younger / less experienced colleagues in a better way if you had the right opportunities/resources? If yes, then how?
- After reasoning on these issues, is there anything you feel you want to add?